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THE PHANTOM PIRATE; or, The Water Wolves of the Bahamas.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT," "WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



BACK! YOU MAD DEVILS! FOR, IF WITCH I BE, WITH YONDER PHANTOM PIRATE AND DEATH HEAD BEACON NEAR, I AM IN FIT COMPANY ON THIS DOOMED CRAFT!" WAS THE RINGING RESPONSE OF THE MASKED WOMAN IN BLACK.

The Phantom Pirate;

OR,

The Water Wolves of the Bahamas.

A Romance of Sea Mysteries in
the Last Century.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MON-
TEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC., ETC.,

CHAPTER I. THE PHANTOM PIRATE.

"We are doomed! doomed! for behold the
Phantom Pirate!"

The words broke in almost a shriek from the
lips of a man, and he shrunk away from the
helm of a small vessel that he had been holding
upon her course through storm and wildly-toss-
ing waters.

The craft was driving along at a terrific
speed, though mainsail and jib were reefed
down to their highest row of nettles, and the
wind was over her stern quarter, causing her
now to lurch far over, then to bury her bows
deep, and again to dart over a wave as though
her canvas served as wings to aid her in her
flight.

Upon her deck, clinging to the main and fore-
masts, were her crew, four in number, while
the one who uttered the wild cry that opens
this story, had been at the helm, and near him,
clinging to the weather bulwark, was a woman.

A woman, dressed in deepest black, even her
hands being hidden, and her face, for she wore
a mask, beneath the sable covering.

As the man left the helm, seemingly un-
nerved, the woman sprung to it, caught the
craft ere it could luff in that wild sea, and
cried:

"Fool! would you send us to the bottom by
your accursed cowardice?"

"But see! yonder is the Phantom Pirate,
and we are doomed!"

As he uttered the words, in seeming horror,
he pointed with a hand that shook as though
palsied, dead ahead to an object out over the
tempest-swept waters.

The night was a dark one, and yet the sea in
its wild tossing, emitted a certain lurid glare,
often seen in southern latitudes, that made ob-
jects partially distinct at some little distance
away.

With the first words of the helmsman, the
crew of four men had started, and swept their
eyes over the waters.

Now, as they gazed in the direction in which
the helmsman's trembling hand pointed, they
beheld a strange sight, for a vessel, and yet
seemingly, only the ghost of a vessel was visible
flying along on a course that must cross their
bows.

With exclamations of horror, the men rushed
off, and cried in one voice:

"Behold the Phantom Pirate! We are
lost!"

"Cowards! do you fear a phantom?"

"It is the real I fear, not the unreal."

"To your posts of duty!" and the woman

spoke in a voice that arose above the wailing

winds and splashing waters.

The men half-shrunk back from before that

sable-clad form and masked face, as though

they feared the woman almost as much as the

ghostly craft; but their eyes again became

riveted upon the shadowy vessel with a look

that seemed one of fascination.

The Phantom Pirate, as they called the

strange vessel, was a schooner, and under full

sail, in spite of the howling winds.

She seemed to glide along without being

tossed upon the waves, as though skimming

the top of the waters.

The strangest part of it was that she was

a shadow ghost—that is a black schooner, for

hull, spars, rigging and sails were the hue of

jet.

Her crew, visible upon her deck, by a weird

light that seemed to attend her, were clothed in

black, and their faces were either dark, or

covered with sable masks.

Listlessly they stood at their posts, though

evidently seeing the little vessel near, yet seem-
ingly not caring for her presence.

As the two vessels, the little schooner and

the shadow craft, drew nearer to each other,

and it was evident that one or the other must

change their course, the man who had just dis-
covered the weird stranger turned anxiously to

the woman and said:

"I will take the helm again."

"No, I shall keep the helm of this vessel

myself," was the stern reply.

Her words were distinctly heard by the four

men who composed the crew, and with one ac-
cord they seemed bent on some fell purpose,

for they moved toward her, while one cried

out:

"Come, lads! that woman is a witch, and

we'll hurl her into the sea and rid the craft of

the spell she has cast upon it!"

"Ay, ay, lads! that we will!"

"Overboard with the old witch with her
masked face!" was the echoing cry of the
others, and they moved once more toward the
woman.

But suddenly from her lips broke the one
word:

"Behold!"

One of her hands grasped the carved tiller,
the other pointed ahead, and as the eyes of all
fell upon the sight revealed, the men covered
as though face to face with an awful doom.

Out of the sea had seemingly just arisen, for
it was not visible before, or at least had not
been sighted by any one on the little vessel, an
island of rugged rocks and high cliffs.

The course of the vessel was directly upon it,
and it seemed not very far distant, while the
roar of the tempest-hurled breakers, driving
upon it, were now distinctly heard.

Buo it was not this rocky island in their
course that appalled the crew of the little ves-
sel, so much as what they beheld upon it.

Momentarily the Phantom Pirate was forgot-
ten, and their eyes were riveted upon a new
sight of horror.

Half-way up the cliff of rock, had suddenly
burst forth fiery eyes, or beacons, sending lurid
rays out over the foaming waters.

It was a brilliant light, one that would have
gladdened a sailor's heart as a friendly beacon,
under different circumstances, and away from
those dangerous waters of the Bahamas; but
now it seemed to palsy the heart of those who
beheld it.

"The Skull Beacon!" cried the woman at the
helm, as the appalled men hid their faces from
the sight and moaned:

"Doomed! doomed!"

And a strange, ghastly beacon it was, for it
was a huge skull serving the place of a light-
house lamp, with the fiery glare cast from the
eye-sockets, in two streams of brilliancy over
the sea, and yet shedding around it a halo that
lit it up in all its deathlike splendor.

"Witch of Hades, you are rushing us to our
doom!"

"Put about, or we hurl you into the sea!"
shouted one of the crew, and once more the
men sprung toward the woman.

"Back! you mad devils! for, if witch I be,
with yonder Phantom Pirate and Death Head
Beacon near, I am in fit company on this doom-
ed craft!" was the ringing response of the
masked woman in black.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK WITCH AT THE HELM.

At the cry of the masked woman pilot, the
crew again shrunk back, to once more gain
courage as they beheld how swiftly they were
dashing upon the rocky island, from whose cliff
came the baleful glare from the Death's Head
Beacon.

Then they once more started toward the
woman, to again be checked by her cry:

"Behold! the Pirate Phantom has disappear-
ed!"

They all glanced off over the waters, to see
that the words of the woman were true—the
Phantom Pirate had suddenly vanished.

Had her masses of canvas run her under?

If not, how had she so mysteriously dropped
out of sight, as mysteriously as she had come
before their view.

They stood in awe and silence, but their
thoughts were busy.

Was the woman indeed a witch?

Were they viewing one who was allied to the
supernatural?

Theirs had been an honest craft, a coaster
along the Gulf shores, and they had chartered
her for a voyage, they knew not where, to the
man who had shrunk from the helm when the
Phantom Pirate appeared.

He had come on board by night, and with
him had come that masked woman in black.

Who she was they knew not, and from the
night of sailing, they had stood in awe of her.

She took her trick at the helm with the rest
of them, and she certainly had proven herself
possessed of a thorough knowledge of a vessel
and how to manage it.

The young man with her had a handsome
face, a little marked by dissipation, and marred
with civil, yet an attractive one withal.

He too had shown himself the perfect sailor,
but he seemed to treat the masked woman with
a certain respect amounting to fear of her.

Where the craft was bound the crew knew
not.

They had been paid with extravagant liber-
ality for their voyage, and had asked no ques-
tions after sailing from the port of Pensacola.

Now, after a week at sea they found them-
selves among the Bahamas, in a locality most
dangerous, on account of reefs and islands, and
where many a strange story had been told of
seeing a Phantom Pirate in those waters, and
for an honest craft to see which was to doom
the vessel and her crew to death.

Sailor yarns had it that a famous pirate had
asked Heaven to curse him, and his vessel, if he
failed to capture a certain Spanish galleon
freighted with gold.

Failing to take the coveted prize, the pirate
vessel had become accursed, and was doomed

to sail the seas over with no haven, no hope,
and no power to capture a vessel, but dooming
all that might cross its course to certain destruc-
tion and the crews to death.

This weird story all seamen of that age religi-
ously believed, for fore-castle and quarter-deck
alike were ruled by superstitious fears a cen-
tury ago, and even now Jack tars are be-
lievers, many of them, in the supernatural,
while "signs" govern them most strangely for
good or for evil.

"Lads, she is a witch, and she has brought
that Phantom Pirate before our eyes."

"We dare not touch her," whispered one of
the little vessel's crew, as their craft drove on
like the wind, the Black Phantom no longer in
sight, but the Skull Beacon still glaring down
upon them with its lurid eyes.

"For God's sake put about, or we are lost,"
cried the young man, stepping nearer to the
woman, and speaking in a hoarse, entreating
voice.

"Silence!" was the stern response from the
hidden lips, and the woman still held on her
course, which was as straight for the Death
Head Beacon as a bird could fly.

The crew heard what passed, and, when the
woman refused to listen to her companion, they
knew it was useless for them to speak, and they
clung to the mast and bulwarks in awe, their
eyes fastened upon the beacon in the side of the
cliff, which was now not very far distant from
the little vessel.

"Take the helm and hold her as she is," sud-
denly said the woman, and she relinquished the
tiller to her companion, while she glided for-
ward, seemingly not affected by the pitching of
the vessel, for she walked with remarkable
steadiness.

For a moment or more she stood gazing with
a night-glass dead ahead of the vessel, and then
hastily returned to the stern, to suddenly dis-
cover the crew in possession of the helm,
her companion having retreated before their
threatening advance.

"Now lads, we've got the craft, and we'll do
what we can to keep her off yonder breakers."

"Ready all to go about!"

It was one of the four men who spoke the
words, and his comrades were about to obey,
when the woman almost shrieked:

"Hold! Away from that helm, or I will put
a spell upon you that will lead you to perdi-
tion!"

In dismay the men shrunk back, and the
masked woman sprung to the tiller, caught the
little schooner before she could luff, and held
her on her course as before, the men flying
amidships as though fearing to be near her.

Just at that moment the cliff suddenly became
dark, the lights went out in the Death's Head
eye-sockets, and a gloom that was tangible fell
upon the sea, while a pleading voice came from
forward:

"For the love of God, spare us!"

It was the utterance of one of the four seamen,
appealing to the masked woman, whom they
now felt confident had some supernatural powers
which a witch or wizard alone could possess.

"Breakers ahead!" cried the young man,
clinging to the weather bulwark, as he beheld a
wall of foam almost under the bows of the little
schooner.

But the helmswoman never moved the tiller
an iota, although she too saw the line of foam.

On dashed the schooner, the eyes of the woman
seemingly fixed upon vacancy, for the darkness
was now intense, and the next instant the seeth-
ing waters seemed about to engulf her, while a
cry broke from the lips of the crew as they ex-
pected to hear her strike and be shivered to
atoms.

But, excepting a surging, sinking, tottering
motion, she held on, and the next moment was
in smoother water, with the cliffs of the island
towering far above her decks.

CHAPTER III.

A BOY'S REVENGE.

A MAN stood alone in a room on the ground
floor of a vast, rambling, and ancient mansion,
that had long borne the name of the "Haunted
Manor."

In years gone by it had been a villa, built and
owned by some Spanish Don; but dark deeds
had transpired within its walls, and no heir
claiming it, the place had been sold for a song
and the purchaser was a shrewd man who made
his living out of the necessities and miseries of
others, for he was a lender of money, where the
security was five fold the amount loaned, and
the interest usurious.

Of his antecedents nothing was known; but
he was said to possess vast wealth, and there
were hints that he was the salesman of piratical
and smuggled booty, and that he could and
would, for gold in quantity enough to take the
risks, furnish anything demanded of him, from
an assassin to a vessel and crew to sail under the
black flag of the buccaneer.

His shop, his private office and living room,
were the only chambers occupied in the old
structure, and there he remained at night the
sole occupant, saving a boy of eighteen, who
was his confidential factotum, and who was
wont to tell his fellow clerks, who served in the

"curiosity-shop" by day, that the house was indeed haunted, was filled with secret passages, and often ghosts were heard walking the deserted corridors by night.

The room in which the man stood meditating, was one that seemed more like the sanctum of an author, and studio of an artist, than the private office of a lender of gold, for articles of all kinds, statuary, armor, books, paintings and curiosities from many lands adorned the rooms.

At last the man, whose face showed that he was musing deeply, turned, and the light from a window opening upon a garden court, fell full upon his dark face.

It was a face to see and not forget.

The face of a refined man, and withal a polished villain, one that might deceive the innocent, but never one who read human nature well.

"I dare not remain longer, and I must fly, for, when that woman knows that she has not killed me with her poison, as she believes, she will return, and all will be lost.

"Thank Heaven I have my wealth so that I can take it with me.

"Now to get it, and the world can think what it pleases of the fate of the money-lender."

As he ceased speaking he removed a heavy rug from the floor, and then putting his foot upon a secret spring, a part of the flooring slid back and a cavernous aperture was revealed.

Into this the man descended, and the chink of gold arose from below.

Then the door softly opened and a boy entered.

A boy with a handsome, daring face, and with a certain sadness resting in the eyes that told a story of scenes in his past, young as he was, for he seemed hardly more than sixteen, that had taken much of the sunshine from his young life.

It was the clerk of the money-lender, and, as his eyes fell upon the open trap, his face became livid, his form trembled, and springing forward he closed the aperture, while through his shut teeth came the words:

"At last! at last! my moment of revenge has come against that man.

"He ruined my father and caused him to take his own life; he kidnapped my little sister, and broke my mother's heart, and drove me a wanderer forth in the world.

"He knows me not as the boy of eight years old whom he last saw by his dead mother's side; but I swore revenge against him and it has come, for, in that vault he will soon die, while I, with his bank-notes here, will now seek the world over for my little sister."

Muffled sounds now came from below; but soon these ceased and all was silent.

Then the boy took a seat and coolly looked over a roll of bank-notes he took from a small satchel.

"They are as much mine as his, for he robbed my father of his gold and his life.

"I will take them, for here is a small fortune, and it will aid me to try and find little Lita."

With this the boy passed out of the room, shuddering as he glanced back at the trap that was over the vault, and where he knew that he had shut a man up to die, yet one who well merited punishment for his crimes.

Two days after strange stories were floating through the city of the mysterious disappearance of the rich money-lender, and he was searched for far and wide, and the old mansion was ransacked from ground floor to attic, but without avail.

Those who were in his shop could tell nothing regarding him, and then came out the secret that his confidential clerk had also most mysteriously disappeared.

As days passed into weeks, and neither the money-lender or his confidential clerk could be found, the authorities shut up the old mansion and left it to its former fate once more, that of desertion, and many said, to the ghosts that had long inhabited its chambers.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE PAIR.

WITHIN a room of an inn in the Crescent City, only a short distance from where stood the Haunted Manor, sat two persons, several days after the scene where the money-lender was buried alive in his secret money-vault.

The one was a woman, dressed in deep black, and with her face veiled so completely that it was not in the least visible.

Her form was graceful in outline and willowy, while her motions were rapid and seemingly nervous.

The other was a young man of twenty-four, perhaps, possessed of an elegant form, and handsome face, though one that was neither to be trusted or would win esteem.

They would converse together for awhile in earnest tones, and then remain silent for long minutes.

"You are sure that you killed him?" suddenly asked the young man, addressing the woman.

"Boy, do you think I am a fool?" was the harsh response.

"No; but tell me again about your visit to him."

"I went, under pretense of borrowing money, and told him I had need of an immense sum, for I wished to hear from his own lips that he was as rich as you said he was."

"I should know, having been for a year in his employ," impatiently answered the man.

"He offered to lend me any sum, placing no limit, so that my security was good.

"Then it was that I asked him for a glass of wine, as I felt weak, and begged him to also join me.

"He poured out the wine into two glasses, and attracting his attention to something else, I placed the poison in his glass."

"Did you see him drink it?"

"Boy, were not the results conclusive, for soon he half-swooned away, and then I raised my veil and showed him that I was his wife, the woman he had so cruelly deserted, leaving her in the hands of savages, while he made his escape, sought this land and made a fortune."

"He knew you?"

"Yes, in spite of all, and he knew that he owed his death to me."

"Did you see him die?"

"Yes, and then I left and came back here to tell you."

"It is strange that his body was not found in his room."

"That is strange; but my idea is that his clerks, finding him dead, and fearing that they would be accused of murdering and robbing him, hid the body away, perhaps in some secret cell of the old Haunted Manor."

"But the boy's disappearance, too?"

"How do you account for that?"

"He may have found him dead, robbed him, and then fled, while the others hid him away."

"It must be so; but very little has he left."

"That can be found, yes; but I shall keep my eye on that old house, and some day claim it, as his wife, and when I tear it down, there will be gold found hidden deep in its walls, ay, and precious gems, too."

"Why not do so now?"

"Because we would be suspected as his murderers, if we tore down the old place now."

"And having failed in getting our fortune, what then?"

"I did not fail in my revenge, boy; but having failed in the fortune, we must make one."

"How?"

"As I have in the past."

"By wrecking?"

"Yes, and piracy, too, if you do not fear to take a vessel under the sable flag."

"No, one life is as dangerous as the other, and it is gold I seek; but it will never do for you to go back to the old island."

"Nor will I, boy; but to a far better field."

"Where?"

"The Bahamas."

"There are strange stories told of scenes among these islands."

"What care I, and what should you care?"

"Sea-spooks and death-crafts I have a horror of," and the man shuddered.

The woman laughed, and her harsh tones vanished, as she broke forth in a burst of musical laughter.

"You seem amused," growled the young man.

"I am, when you seem to fear the supernatural."

"After all I have seen I yet am superstitious enough to believe in sea-spooks."

"I am not, and my fear is of the living, not the dead."

"But, come, we must away from here."

"And whither shall we go?"

"The landlord told you that a vessel sailed for Pensacola to-night, did he not?"

"Yes."

"Then we sail on her."

"And then?"

"We will charter a craft and go where I think best," was the calm reply of the woman, and there was that in her tone that told she meant to be obeyed.

CHAPTER V.

THE ESCAPE.

WHEN the money-lender beheld the trap close above his head, saw the white face of the boy avenger, and heard his words, he for a moment stood like one dazed.

Then he sprang up the iron ladder and called loudly for help, beating the trap with his fists.

But there was a double flooring, and his voice and blows could hardly be heard by the boy, and still more were unheeded.

There was a lantern in the vault, and this showed the place to be small, and stoutly walled on every side, excepting where an iron door seemed set in one wall.

For a man who had been buried alive, the face of the money-lender looked strangely unconcerned, and his manner was little like one who felt that he must die a fearful death.

"I have my gems, and I must depart; but that accursed boy may cause me trouble by his revengeful act if I do not hasten."

"So he is the son of that man and that woman, is he?"

"I always thought he had a familiar look

about him, but I did not recall him; and no wonder, when he was a boy of eight then.

"Well, his parents are in their graves, and where his sister is I know not, nor care, so he never finds her, and the kidnappers I hired to do the work, did it too well for him to do that.

"And he thinks he has avenged them all by burying me alive?"

"So let him think, and let the world believe me dead."

"Now let me see if I am really buried alive, or if I can not find my way out of this vault!"

He threw open the iron door now, and damp air blew in his face, causing him to shudder, and remark:

"That does smell like the grave."

Taking up his lantern, he stepped into the open space, which was a tunnelway, very narrow, and not high enough for him to stand, thus causing him to go in a position bent far over.

The flooring, though paved, was wet, and the place uninviting in the extreme; but it was like a road to Paradise, to the one who was using it as a means of escape from death.

On, on, he walked, a turn here and there, and at last he came to the foot of a ladder of iron.

Ascending this, and leaving the lantern on the floor, in the water which had oozed through the bricks, he came to a small iron shutter, just large enough to give egress to a man.

After a short search he found a spring, which he touched several times without any result.

"Great God! is it not going to open?" he gasped in sudden fright.

Again he placed his hand upon the spring, and pressing with all his might, he uttered a cry of joy as the iron shutter swung open slowly upon its rusted hinges.

Glancing out, he saw only the branches of trees, which there grew against the wall of the house in profusion.

But he sprang from the window to the ground, and reclosed the shutter, which was so painted as to resemble the wall of the house, and, being also concealed beneath the foliage, its presence would never have been suspected.

He found himself in a garden, with a high wall upon one side, and the wings of the old manor surrounding it on the other three sides.

In the wall was a gate, and it was locked; but a key he took from his pocket opened it, and he found himself in a side street.

Rapidly he walked along until he came to a huge oaken portal.

This was one entrance, upon another street, of his own house, the Haunted Manor.

A key he carried also unlocked this door, and he passed into a large deserted hallway.

Up the broad stairway he went, his steps awakening dismal echoes as he went along, causing a tribe of rats to skurry away here, and mice to scatter from his path to some safe retreat.

Following a narrow hall upon the second floor, he came, at last apparently to its end.

But he seemed thoroughly acquainted with the old mansion where he had so long dwelt, and touching a spring, a panel opened in the wall.

This displayed a narrow stairway, leading down into his own sanctum, which it entered by a secret panel, and where he had so recently left to descend into the vault, where he had nearly been buried alive.

Upon his right was a hallway, and along this he passed until he came again to an apparent wall before him, which could be but dimly seen by the light of the open panel into the large corridor.

Another spring was touched, and the wall turned on an axis, displaying a small room, which he crossed to an iron door upon which he rapped.

It was immediately opened by an old negress, one whose face was wrinkled and cunning.

"Is your mistress ready?" asked the money-lender.

"Yes, massa, she am ready, sab, or dat is to say she will be soon."

The room he entered was a handsome one, yet its surroundings and approaches, gave one the idea that it was a gilded cage, or prison.

At that moment a form swept into the room and approached the money-lender.

A woman of wondrous beauty of face, elegance of form and fascination of manner, that might make men her slaves.

Her eyes were large and lustrous, yet now tinged with a dreamy look of touching sadness.

She was dressed in an out-door suit, that set off her superb figure to perfection.

"Lady, I have come to tell you that we must fly at once, as I said to you I feared would be the case, when I last saw you."

"But, senor, you are pale, and your boots and clothing are damp and mud-stained," said the woman in a voice that was rich-toned and full of music.

"Yes, the necessity of an immediate flight is such, that I was forced to leave my office by a secret tunnel under the flooring, and you know our vaults in this city are damp places; but are you ready, lady?"

"Yes."

"And your disguises?"

"Are here, for us; but yours?"

"As I see that you and the negress are both to hide beneath the robes of Catholic sisters, I will take yonder priestly garb," and he pointed to a priest's robe that lay among other garments upon a divan.

These costumes were quickly thrown on, the veils of the women hiding the beauty of the one and the black skin of the other, while the monk's cowl worn by the man would have prevented even the revengeful eyes of the boy who had believed himself avenged, from recognizing him.

"You have your riches, senior?" asked the beautiful woman in the same sweet way in which she had before spoken.

"Yes, all my riches I can take, are with me, lady, and I tell you frankly I carry a large fortune beneath this monk's garb."

"I do not doubt it, senior; but shall we start?"

"Yes," and he led the way from the room, taking good care, as he went along, to close every door and secret panel after him.

As they reached the bottom of the grand stairway, and stood by the massive door, which he had entered from the street, he said:

"It is growing dark fast, and that will aid us."

"You have but to lead the way, senior, and we will follow," was the answer.

Slowly he opened the door and looked out.

A garden, surrounded by a high wall, was on the other side of the street, and glancing up and down the *banquette* he saw no one in sight, so said quickly:

"Come!"

Out into the street the two followed him, and locking the door he led them hastily away in a direction that brought them, after a fifteen minutes' walk, to the river.

There, against a pier, lay moored a small coasting craft, with half a dozen men lying idly about upon her decks.

"Ho, my son, is this the Sentinel?" asked the money-lender, carrying out his disguise of a priest.

"Yes, padre," and the seaman, a good Catholic, crossed himself, while the other men sprung to their feet.

"You were chartered for a cruise, by a young man who came to you from the Chatres street money-lender?"

"Yes, padre."

"I am the one to sail with you, and these sisters go with me."

"Pardon, holy padre; but have you the word?" asked the seaman, embarrassed at having to ask it of a priest.

"Yes, my son, the word is *gold*."

"Right, holy padre; what are your wishes?"

"To get under way at once and sail down the river to open water as fast as the wind will drive you."

"It shall be done, Senior Padre," was the response, and, while the passengers went into the cabin of the little craft, the sailors cast off, set sail, and headed down the river under a stiff breeze.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH'S HEAD BEACON ROCK.

THERE was no more dreary island in all the Bahama group than the one on which the ghastly beacon had appeared, casting its lurid light down upon the deck of the little schooner, at whose helm stood the masked woman in black, holding the craft on a course which seemed to be one of certain destruction.

Other islands were near—here a mile, there a league away, and a ship's channel ran through them, though few vessels ever attempted to pass among the dangers there surrounding them, except in broad daylight.

Now and then, however, a craft was forced to attempt to run the channel with darkness upon the waters, and seldom was it that that craft was heard of again.

Sailors told strange tales of specter vessels having been seen cruising through the islands, and strangest of all, was the fact that a buccaneer craft had been chased scores of times by cruisers to the island haunts, and there lost sight of in a mysterious manner that no one could account for.

This cunning craft was described as a black schooner, with sable spars and sails; and no matter how driven, it always managed to reach its dangerous cruising-ground just at night-fall.

A sailing-vessel once, chartered by a band of gallant tars, had determined to solve the mystery of this deadly cruising-ground, and it had gone boldly toward it, watched and waited, until a calm came, and then drifted toward the Death's Head Beacon Rock, about which the Phantom Pirate had most frequently been seen.

It was broad daylight then when the daring sailors came near the fatal rock, and they were hoping that the mystery would soon be solved, and were about to lower the boats to try and land, for the sea was as calm as a mill-pond, when the heavens suddenly became overcast with inky clouds, the waters heaved wildly, and a hurricane swept down upon the doomed

ship and hurled it and its brave crew to destruction.

Such stories of the deadly Bahamas naturally made all sailors fearful of facing its dread dangers; and especially was the Beacon Rock feared, for about it was said to be the cruising-ground of the Phantom Pirate.

By day this island presented the appearance of an almost solid block of rock, surrounded upon all sides by the ragged heads of reefs, while by night it was a spot to be shunned by any craft that wished to keep afloat.

And yet under the very shadows of this Death Rock had the little schooner driven, and with a woman at her helm.

Through dangers, which her crew believed she could not pass, she had gone, and was now going straight toward the solid rock.

"Lower the sails!" said the woman in a low, stern voice, and the crew sprung with alacrity to obey.

But on she drove under bare poles, though the waters were comparatively smooth there, until it seemed that another moment must dash her to pieces.

Then was heard the woman's voice once more:

"Let fall the anchors!"

Into the sea the iron went, the schooner rode over them, jerked at them viciously, swung round and was safe, her stern not her own length from the Death Rock, which towered far above her.

"She's a witch, lads, or she'd never be able to do what she has done," whispered one of the men.

"Yes, Jack, she's got evil power, certain; and it's our duty to obey her to keep her spell off o' us," answered one of the men.

"How it'll all come out, God only knows," was the despondent remark of a third, while the fourth groaned:

"We are doomed, lads, and we'll never see an honest port again!"

In the mean while, seeing that the waves and winds were not strong enough there to cause the schooner to drag her anchors, the masked woman began to eye the face of the rock in a peculiar manner. After some time spent in this, she said:

"Lower away that boat, men; and you, boy, come with me to pull the oars."

The last remark was addressed to the young man, her companion, who, evidently not relishing the work before him, answered:

"I should stay on board to prevent the men from running off with the schooner."

"Bah! they dare not attempt it, so come with me," was the contemptuous and imperious response combined.

The men had let fall the little boat from the stern davits, and as it danced on the waters under the craft's lee, the masked woman sprung lightly into it, and the young man followed and seized the oars.

"Cast off!" she said, and the boat was freed.

"Now pull steadily, and I will guide you," remarked the woman, as she took the tiller.

The young man obeyed in silence for a few strokes, and then said:

"We will be into the rock."

"I am the pilot, boy," was the low response; and after a moment the oarsman ceased his rowing and glanced first upon one side and then on the other, after which he turned his gaze upward.

"Great God! we are going right into the rock!" he cried.

"We are passing through a narrow cut in its walls, boy, so to your work again," returned the woman. And a few moments after the boat shot through the crevice that split the rocky walls from summit to foundation, and they found themselves in a small basin, surrounded upon all sides with the same wild scene of desolation.

They had penetrated to the interior of the Death's Head Beacon Rock.

CHAPTER VII.

A BEAUTIFUL SINNER.

IT was the afternoon before the night of storm, that opens this story when the little schooner with its woman helmsman, is discovered driving among the rocky islands of the Bahamas.

The sunlight falls upon a sea scarcely broken by a ripple, except here and there where the ever restless waters are surging over sunken reefs, or against the desolate islands that break the vast expanse upon all sides.

A dangerous locality for a vessel to be, certainly, unless her pilot well knows the perilous channel that leads through dangers to open waters:

And yet a small vessel is visible, lazily sailing along through the dangers, and seemingly heading toward a distant island, that rises like a giant rock out of the sea.

As the reader has already seen that little craft and its strange crew, driving along the storm and darkness of the night that followed the day of calm, I need not here speak of it in a descriptive way, but go on to the distant rock island, that seems almost uninhabitable save to the sea-fowl that fly about it.

Yet, upon its summit, gazing out over the waters, stands a human being.

Her appearance and dress are in strange contrast to the place, for she wears a robe of silk, and her neck and arms are covered with jewels, as her fingers are with rings.

She is a mere girl, and, with all her finery and wealth of gems, her little shapely feet are bare of either shoes or stockings.

Her face is burned as brown as a berry, as are also her hands, feet and ankles.

But her form is perfect in its outline, and her face is as beautiful as a Madonna's, and with all the soft loveliness that dwells in the Madonna's, while now and then the tender eyes, full of dreamy pathos, light up with the lurking fire that is thundering within.

Perhaps fifteen, perhaps a year or two younger, and yet with the calm dignity of a woman, she stands there upon the very edge of the rock, looking down sheer one hundred feet to instant death, should her nerve fail her and she fall from the dizzy height.

"Another vessel in sight," she cried, and her voice was soft and sweet in tone.

"More people to die! more graves in the deep sea that loved ones can never weep over, as I have read that they do in the books we get from wrecks."

"It seems wrong to kill our own kind as we do here."

"It seems strange to light that beacon as a guide for vessels to rush to wreck, and their crews to death."

"But those two people say that it is right, for people who sail the seas are our foes, and I suppose they know."

"They should know better than I, who am only a girl."

"But it seems to me it is cruel."

"Ah me! I wish I could have the wings of yonder birds, and fly far from here, to where the books are made, to the towns where people live, the ports from whence these brave ships sail, and see if all are like those two," and she pointed with her hand toward the center of the rock.

"Would I ever come back here?"

"No, indeed!"

"But it seems to me that once I lived away from here, in a pretty place I often dream about, and that the one who called me her child was different from that woman I now call mother."

"Leo, too, seems different from one I knew, or know in my dreams, and the man I call father seem unlike my dream-father."

"But I guess these books are disturbing my mind, as mother says, and if I continue to read them, I will be unhappy."

"Ah! that was the roll of distant thunder, or the heavy gun of a war-ship, chasing another."

"No, it was thunder, and we are going to have a storm."

"Fly, pretty little craft, fly away from here, or your bones will be on these rocks in the morning, and your crew will be dead."

"No, they heed not the thunder, and care not for the storm, for all is quiet upon her decks, as she sails along in such a lazy way," and her eyes rested upon the little schooner, on whose decks stood the masked woman in black, and which was gliding along three knots to the hour, some two leagues distant from the rocky island upon which stood the young girl.

"Well, I must not stand here, but get to work, or mother will be after me, thinking I am reading and idling, as she calls it."

Walking along the edge of the cliff, the girl soon stopped at a point over which hung a rope-ladder.

Without hesitating, she stepped upon it and began to descend with the same confidence that an old sailor would the rigging of his ship.

Some forty feet she went down, and there paused, stepping out upon a foot-swing that ran around a ledge in the cliff wall.

Upon that ledge was a strange object indeed, and one that would naturally fill one with horror to gaze upon.

It was a *huge skull*.

Most skillfully had it been molded of white clay, and as it rested there on the ledge it was higher than the girl's head when she stood on the foot-swing before it, leaning her hands for a rest upon the huge teeth.

The object of this massive skull was at once evident for the eye-sockets were filled with looking-glass broken in bits, and so arranged as to reflect a hundred times the rays of a ship's lanterns set far back.

Over the sockets hung a tissue-like fabric of green, which could be lowered and raised by cords, giving the light a livid, ghastly glare.

Back in the mouth, large enough for the girl to enter, when she drew aside two of the upper row of teeth, for they worked on a hinge, was another lantern.

This was so placed that it cast a shimmer of light through the grinning teeth, and a reflection out of the nose.

Seating herself coolly in the ghastly object, the young girl began to brush up the glasses and clean the lamps.

This being done she lighted them, and passing

outside, unmindful that but a rope beneath her feet was between her and death, she also burnished up two smaller lights, upon either side of the gigantic skull.

These were so arranged as to cast a glow, rather than a light upon the huge Death's Head Beacon.

Before all this, fastened along the top securely to the rock, fell a huge canvas.

The sides were on pulleys, and could be lowered from the cliff, or raised in an instant, whether a gale was blowing or not.

When lowered, the canvas, painted the same color as the rocky face of the cliff, would shield the skull, light, and all its appurtenances, from view from a vessel's decks, even if that vessel was at the very base of the rocky island.

It was certainly a most ingeniously contrived light, and a hideous one, while it was one to strike terror to the heart and brain of the superstitious mariner that beheld it upon a dark, stormy night.

"There, my work is done for the day," said the girl, as she ascended the rope ladder and again stood upon the cliff.

"The little vessel has not moved, and no wonder, for there is a calm.

"But that storm is rushing on, and will soon lash the sea into foam—and then? Poor little vessel, poor crew!" and she turned her gaze upon the now darkening skies, which were rapidly shutting out the light of the setting sun, and threatening to lash the sea into wildest fury ere an hour had gone by.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WATER WOLVES.

WHEN the young girl left the cliff she went back toward the center of the island.

A short distance brought her to another cliff, and from there she looked down upon a strange scene.

The island without was a perfect shell of rock, while on one side, within, was a plot of a few acres of verdure, with trees, grass and a spot that was almost an Eden of beauty.

There were several little huts visible, built of wreckage from vessels, and it was certainly a quiet retreat to gaze upon.

Behind this little garden spot of verdure rose the high walls, or cliffs of rock, and in front of it was a basin hardly an acre in size.

Down to the water's edge sloped the land, and lying upon the snowy sands were skiffs of various kinds, with a sail-boat and a ten-ton smack anchored out in deep water.

At first glance this pool and garden spot seemed to have no means of ingress or egress; but by looking closely one could see that the cliff, seaward, was split in twain from summit to foundation.

It was a narrow opening, not over thirty feet wide, and winding, too, passing from the sea to the basin through the rock, a distance of a couple of hundred feet.

Around the rock island was a reef only broken here and there, and it was at the break nearly opposite the cleft in the rocks that the reader beheld the masked woman pilot the little schooner.

This pass looked impassable to an ordinary observer, yet the schooner had come through it in safety.

Once within the reef the waters were deep, clear into the basin, and protected as it was by the little haven, was a safe anchorage for vessels.

Over the cliff where she stood gazing with admiration upon the scene below, although she saw it daily, the young girl swung herself upon the rope-ladder, descending with rapidity and perfect confidence.

Arriving at the bottom she saw coming toward her a young man.

He was tall, straight, perfectly-formed, and darkly bronzed as an Indian.

He wore his hair, which was black and curling, far down his back, and a mustache of the same ink hue shaded his upper lip, though it did not hide the even rows of pearl-white teeth that glistened beneath.

His eyes were sparkling, but vicious, and his look was one of cruelty and cunning.

He was dressed as a sailor, yet wore rings upon his fingers, bracelets and a necklace, while a jewel-bilted knife was in the red sash that encircled his waist.

"Well, Lita, a storm is brewing," he said as he approached the girl.

"Yes, Leo."

"Are the lamps all right?"

"Certainly, Leo; you know I never neglect my work."

"I meant not to reprove you, Lita; I only asked, as there is a storm coming up, and when fishing some time ago in the inlet, I saw a vessel afar off."

"Yes, a small schooner."

"She may have a rich freight."

"That you will know to-morrow; but mother calls us to supper."

The two walked on to the larger of the three cabins, that stood in a row, facing the basin, and where were a man and a woman.

The man was attired as a sailor, wore no

jewelry, as did the others, and had a bearded face, with black, evil eyes.

In his belt he had a knife and pair of pistols.

The woman was hardly more than forty years of age, but her hair was gray, and that caused her to appear older.

Her face was browned, but showed traces of former beauty, and her form was still graceful in outline.

But, like the girl, Lita, she was attired in regal splendor, wearing silks, laces, velvets and jewels, though her occupation, as the youth and girl approached, was frying fish over a fire made of bits of wrecking.

"Girl, there is a storm coming," said the man, as she approached with the youth.

"Yes, father."

"Any craft in sight?"

"Yes, father."

"Ah! that is good."

"What is she?"

"A small schooner."

"Small vessels sometimes carry rich loads."

"Where is she?"

"Two leagues away, off the Shark's Fin Rock."

"Well she'll soon feel the storm, and night is coming on, so she will be ours by the morning; but come, let us eat," and the strange quartette sat down to a table—evidently taken from the cabin of some unfortunate vessel, and began their repast upon dishes of solid silver, which had found their way to the Deaths' Head Beacon Rock, the home of the Water Wolves of the Bahamas.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEATH BEACON.

It was a strange quartette that sat down to supper upon that rock island in the Bahamas.

Three of them appeared as though they might be of one blood, viz., the elderly man, the woman and the youth, Leo.

There was that about them which seemed to prove their kindred, either as that existing between parent and child, or the relationship that exists among comrades in guilt.

It was a strange place for them to live, in that seemingly desolate spot; and that they dwelt there from no motive of good was evident.

But, with the girl, who had so coolly brightened up the Death's Head Lamp, and then descended to the cabin to supper, with pity in her heart for the little craft that its false rays might decoy to destruction, it was different.

She dressed with all the gaudiness that a barbarian chief might have done, having the jewels, velvets and satins at her command, and in an atmosphere of sin; but then one glance into her beautiful face was sufficient to show that no guile dwelt in her young heart, and what she did that was wrong, she executed in a way as though from habit or compulsion.

Having finished her repast, and eaten with a relish that perfect health alone can give, the young girl arose and started toward the cliff, over which hung the rope-ladder, which in fact was made of a vessel's shrouds.

"Which way, Lita?" asked the youth.

"I am going to see that the lamp is all right, Leo," she answered, looking back over her shoulder, without stopping.

He did not follow her, and she went on her way, muttering:

"I know that the lamp is all right, for I never neglect it, hateful as the work is to me."

"But there is a storm rolling rapidly over, and I wish to see if that little craft is still nearing this dreaded island."

Up the ladder she went, with the utmost ease and confidence, and as her foot touched the top of the cliff, there came a vivid glare across the heavens, followed by the crash of thunder that fairly shook the island.

But she did not flinch, for, girl though she was, she had a nerve of iron, and had faced too many dread storms out in her little skiff, upon the tempest-swept waters, to care for the raging elements when her feet were upon *terra firma*.

Her first glance was out upon the sea, and in the gathering darkness she beheld a twinkling light, which she knew was upon the deck of the little vessel.

Then she beheld the light dancing about, and knew that the storm had reached the vessel, while to her ears came the roar, as it skurried along over the waters, howling most furiously, as here and there an island or rock barred its way.

Seeking the rope-ladder hanging over the skiff, and heading to the Death's Head Beacon, the young girl quickly descended to a shelter on one side of it, and, raising the canvas screen, the act sent the weird glare of the false lights out over the waters.

Then she stood there, crouching out of the fierce fury of the tempest, while her eyes took in the scene of appalling grandeur spread out before her.

A false step, a tremor of the nerve, would have buried her into the depths below to instant death.

But there was no quiver to her slender frame, no fear in her utterly fearless heart.

Thus she waited, seemingly for some purpose

other than to observe the tempest from that giddy height.

Glancing out over the dark, wind-swept waves, and in a direction different from the one where she had seen the little vessel, her eyes fell upon a startling sight, yet one that did not seem to frighten her.

And how could it, with her body pressed against the huge skull that was then striking terror to the hearts of those upon the little vessel.

It was the Phantom Pirate she beheld, the same ghastly craft that had so amazed and appalled those on the little vessel, at whose helm stood the masked woman in black.

"The Water Wolves are at their ghastly work again," muttered the girl, and she allowed her eyes to rest upon the seemingly phantom craft for a while, and then turned them once more in search of the little vessel.

In the driving spray that flew across the waters, it was some time before even her keen vision detected the craft.

Then she discerned the tiny vessel, flying along like the very wind, and she cried, as though in terror:

"Oh, Heaven have mercy! it believes it is in the channel between the Death Rock and the Pitfall Reefs, and will soon dash to ruin!"

A few moments after she said:

"It is almost upon the Pitfall Reefs, and I must do my duty, or father Solaro will kill me."

"Yes, he would kill me!"

So saying, she seized the halyards that controlled the canvas screen and drew it quickly down over the skull lamp, and all was darkness upon the waters.

Then she hastily ascended to the cliff top, and turning, gazed earnestly down into the gloom and chaos to find the vessel she had just seen driving toward destruction.

Nowhere was it visible, and with a shudder she muttered:

"How quickly and silently she went to her doom, and without a shriek from her poor crew."

"Ah me! this is fearful," and she turned slowly away from the cliff, little dreaming that the craft she had believed so suddenly wrecked, was then lying in safety under the very shadow of the rocks upon which she stood.

CHAPTER X.

THE MASKED WOMAN'S DISCOVERY.

I WILL now return to the masked woman and her companion, who, the reader will remember, left the little vessel at its dangerous anchorage beneath the Death Rock's shadow, and rowed shoreward in the small boat.

The force of the waves, though broken by the outer reefs, was sufficient to urge the boat into the pass that suddenly opened before their eyes, and they found themselves thus within the secret basin, that no seaman sailing by the island in broad daylight, would have suspected the existence of.

All was darkness about them, and the storm was still sweeping the seas without, while the waves, falling with thundering sound upon the rocks, fairly shook the island.

Across the basin, where the waters were comparatively calm, the woman ordered the man to row, and before long the bows of the boat ran out upon the sand.

"Wait for me here," she said, as she sprang on shore, and then, pausing, she ordered:

"Turn the stern of your boat in there, rest on your oars, and be ready to pull away if need be."

"I will be ready, I assure you, for I like not this place," answered the man.

The woman gave a low laugh, and walked away.

Up in the shadow of some trees she beheld a light twinkling, and thither she cautiously made her way.

A short walk brought her to the cabin, nestling away in the trees, and through one window, taken from the stern cabin port of a vessel, she beheld the interior, for a ship's lamp swung above a table.

In front of the cabin burned a fire of fagots, or rather of wreckage, and this was flickering under the gusts of wind that came over the cliff tops, and through the passage in the rocks leading into the basin.

In the cabin was one person, and that one was a woman.

At once the eyes of the masked woman became riveted upon her face, with a kind of fascination which she could not shake off.

It was the wife of the wrecker she beheld, and she sat at the table, the light falling brightly upon her face, once beautiful, yet now stern, and in her hands she held a skull which she was gazing upon with the look of one who traced in the bony lineaments before her a resemblance to some loved friend, and had her mind filled with memories of the past as she gazed.

The woman without the cabin had faced the mad seas with never so much as a tremor, and had, by her undaunted courage, ruled the men about her.

She had daringly run a gantlet of danger, through the channel, which she had never passed through before, and her hand upon the tiller had never faltered.

But now, as she gazed upon that other woman, she trembled like a reed shaken by the wind.

She started with a look that seemed to burn her very eye-lashes, and her lips were apart with an expression of horror as she gazed through the window.

Suddenly the wrecker woman raised the skull so that the white forehead was just under the swinging lamp, and the one without, staring so fixedly upon every move and action, saw that there were red letters upon the forehead of bone.

Raising her mask and dashing her hands across her eyes several times, as though to clear the mist of tears from them, or to drive off the dazed stare with which she looked into the cabin, the woman read the words on the forehead of the skull, and read them aloud in a low tremulous voice.

"The skull of her who won what I lost.

"I am avenged!"

For a moment after her words, she could find no utterance, though she tried to speak.

At last she gasped forth:

"Great God! she believes that whitened bone to be my skull."

The terror that fell upon the masked woman was too great for her to overcome, and, with a groan she sunk down upon the ground, and lay motionless beneath the cabin window.

For some moments she there remained, unseen by a man who walked by and entered the cabin, and yet seemingly aroused by the hum of voices within.

Starting up she gave one glance into the cabin, and then placing her hands over her forehead, as though to calm her brain's wild throbbing, she fled with the speed of a deer to the landing.

The man was there in the boat, and she sprung into the stern with a leap that sent it plowing through the waters.

"Are you pursued?" asked the man, dashing his oars into the water and pulling with all his might.

"Yes," was the hoarse reply.

"By whom?"

"By that which I can never forget."

"Then we'll be taken?"

"No."

"How can we get away?"

"Run out the way we came in."

"We can never make it."

"Then we shall go to the bottom trying," was the reckless response of the masked woman, as the boat now rocked in the waves outside the passage, on its way to the vessel, which still lay at anchor where they had left it, the crew in an agony of suspense at their situation, the absence of the two whom they looked upon as allies of supernatural beings, and the strange happenings of the night.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLIGHT FROM THE ISLAND.

WHEN the boat touched the side of the little vessel, the crew aided the masked woman on board, glad to greet her back, and end their suspense in whatever way they might.

"Get ready to put to sea!"

The order came sternly from the woman's lips, and the men started as it fell upon their ears.

To put to sea in such a storm!

To beat out against such a gale!

To dare the dangers of that fearful gantlet of rocks once more!

The thought filled them with consternation.

They stood like statues gazing upon her, while she, unheeding them more, passed on into the cabin.

For a moment the crew stood gazing at each other in silence, and then were called to action by the words of the woman's companion.

"Come, men, get this boat swung at the davits, and up with the anchor, for we have to get out of this!"

"Sly, shipmate, we'll be with Davy Jones if we leave this hold on the bottom before the storm blows over," said the man who was the smack's master, or skipper.

"We came in here all right," answered Perdido, the young man.

"But we dare not attempt to fly in the face of Heaven by going out."

"The masked woman will pilot us out, as she ran us in."

"No; she can't do that, even if she be a witch, for we came in before the gale, and hit the channel through the reefs, but it can't be done again, messmate," the skipper said doggedly.

"Well, we must make the attempt—that is all."

"Not one foot will I stir to send my soul to Satan," was the reply, and the crew of the skipper stepped to his side with a dogged determination to abide by the decision of their leader.

Perdido was in a quandary.

He was not possessed of a high courage to

meet unlooked-for dangers with a bold front, though he was a man to take big chances for life to accomplish any selfish end he had in view.

He now saw trouble ahead, for the skipper and crew knew that they were safe where they then were, and it seemed as though certain death must meet them if they left the anchorage.

The masked woman, however, had said they were to put to sea, and he knew her nature well enough to understand that she meant it, and would have her way if it lay in her power so to do.

Turning again to the skipper, Perdido said:

"Say, my man, get up the anchor and set sail, for, my word for it, our Lady Captain will run us safely through all dangers."

"No."

"Better do it."

"No; for we are safe here, and we can wait until daylight, and when the storm blows over, can feel our way out of this hole; but we won't leave until we are certain we can get out."

Perdido saw that the man was determined, but he turned to the others, and asked:

"What say you, lads?"

"We are agreed with our skipper, sir," was the response.

Perdido half turned away, and as he did so saw a dark form dart back down the cabin companionway.

It was the woman, and the words of the men had evidently reached her ears.

Upon entering the cabin, after coming on board from the island, she had unrolled what appeared to be a small chart.

This she had examined closely, the while muttering to herself:

"Here lies the channel, and as I ran in, so I can go out; but I must be particular to follow the course here laid down, or she will dash to pieces and go to Davy Jones very quickly."

"I know the points of steering, though, and I am confident to be able to run the gantlet out to deep water."

"Yes, I must do it, for to fail will be to lose my fortune; and after all these years of suffering and sorrow, I must have some joy."

"Bah! how the face of that woman comes before me!"

"And the hideous skull she held in her hands, and with my name upon it."

"Well, she thinks she has her revenge, in the skull before her, but I know that I shall have mine."

"Now, to get out of this hated spot, and I will succeed, for it is not meant for me to die yet."

Again she looked fixedly over the chart for a few minutes, and then leaving it spread out upon the table under the lamp's glare, she started upon deck, the words upon her lips:

"Why is it that I hear no sounds of getting under way?"

As she reached the companionway the words of the crew came to her ears.

"Ha! mutiny!"

"I must quell it, and at once."

With this she darted back down into the cabin, and hastily unlocking a small chest, took out several articles.

One of these she placed over her face beneath her mask, and the others in the folds of her dress.

Then she glided upon deck and called out, sternly:

"Perdido!"

"Ay, ay, lady."

"Why have my orders not been obeyed to put out of here?"

"The crew refuse to leave the anchorage."

"The crew refuse!" and she turned upon the men, who stood grouped together.

"Yes, lady, we are safe here until morning, and then we can see to run out, and will start," said the skipper.

"Fools! do you think that I need daylight for my actions?"

"No, darkness, or dawn, are the same to me, so get up the anchor and I will take the helm," and she stepped to the tiller.

But the men did not move, and seeing it, the woman quickly tore aside her mask, and, standing as she did where the glare from the cabin fell upon her, a cry of horror broke from the crew as they gazed upon her face, for it was that of a fleshless skull, grinning teeth, and back in the eye-sockets a gleam like diamonds.

"Do you obey me!" she cried in a ringing voice.

But the men were appalled, and seemed hardly to possess the power to move.

"Obey, and I pilot you to life and riches."

"Refuse, and Death shall be the pilot to steer you straight to Hades."

"Up with that anchor, I command you!"

Her voice had changed and become as deep-toned as a man's, and in dismay the crew sprung to their posts, and quickly the anchor left the bottom.

Then the sails were spread, and away darted the little vessel to dare desperate dangers in her flight from the Death Beacon Isle, from which the woman, who so ruled others, was flying in alarm from what she had beheld there.

CHAPTER XII.

A PIOUS PIRATE.

ABOUT the time of the storm that swept over the Bahamas and drove the little vessel, at whose helm stood a masked woman in black, into the haven under the Death Head Beacon Island, a craft of the same build was cruising along the Gulf coast, her course lying for Pensacola.

A pleasant breeze was blowing, and the crew and passengers were all on deck, for there were three of the latter.

And these three were dressed in the garb of the church, for one wore the dress of a monk, while the other two appeared in the simple attire of nuns, though their faces were wholly concealed beneath thick veils.

The monk's face was partially visible, and was that of a man who was strong in brain and bold in heart, and seemed to know his power.

One of the nuns was possessed of a slovenly figure, and appeared to be old, while the other's form was of elegant mold, as seen even beneath the attire as a *religieuse*, and her every movement was graceful.

Her hands and feet were small and shapely, and instead of her appearing the more respectful to her evidently aged companion, the latter seemed to show to the young one the greater respect.

The monk would stand alone for a while, gazing calmly out over the waters, and then approach the two women and speak to them in a low tone, his manner ever most respectful to the younger one.

He was tall, well formed, walked with a military rather than a priestly air, and in spite of his garb of the church, looked like one who might prove dangerous if aroused.

"Is not that a sail?" he asked, addressing the younger of the two women.

A momentary glance at the object, and the answer came:

"Yes, and it is strange that we have not seen it before; but it lies so in the sun's wake we failed to observe it."

"It is an armed craft, and is heading toward us."

The woman spoke in a quiet way, and her words certainly showed a knowledge of nautical matters that was remarkable for one of her cloth.

"There is no chance of flight, now, should he prove a foe," and the monk moved a trifle nearer, while the younger nun remarked:

"Whoever, or whatever she be, our garb will not find them our foes, though the crew may suffer."

"True, I had forgotten," said the monk musingly, and he again turned his eyes upon the vessel, now visible to all upon the little craft, and which was coming rapidly toward them.

It was a schooner, lying low in the water, with bows as sharp as a razor, and tall masts that raked with a most mischievous look.

She was armed, that could be plainly seen, and there were a number of men visible upon her decks, their red skull-caps giving them the look of belonging to the outlaw class.

No flag was at her peaks, and the skipper of the little vessel was about to run up his colors, the American flag, when the nun who had before spoken, said something in a quick, low tone to the monk, and he walked toward the sailor and rested his hand upon the bunting.

"Time enough to run that up, when he shows what he is, skipper," he said.

"As you please, padre," was the response, and the colors were not raised.

But soon after a dark roll of bunting went up over the deck of the stranger, and, being shaken out to catch the breeze, revealed a black flag with a strange device in the center.

This device consisted of a die of white, with red spots, and a quill pen, crossed with a red dagger, the die being in the upper crotch formed by them.

"A pirate by his black field, without a doubt! but what a strange device, a die, a pen and a dagger," said the monk.

"We shall soon know more of him," was the calm response of the nun, apparently not moved by the near presence of an outlaw, any more than was her female companion, who in perfect silence and seeming indifference, gazed upon the trim schooner, so rapidly coming down upon them.

The crew, however, were different, for they turned livid as the colors floated above the schooner's decks, and gazed most nervously from her to their pious passengers, as though looking to them to save them from a cruel foe.

A short while more and there came a puff of smoke from the bows of the schooner, and a solid shot went flying over the deck of the little vessel, cutting through the mainsail.

The crew saw that the schooner was in earnest, and glanced from their skipper to the monk, while the younger nun did not flinch though the elder one ducked down at the whizzing shot, with an alacrity that was amazing.

"Lay to, skipper," ordered the monk, who, though a passenger, seemed to hold full authority on board.

But ere the order was obeyed another shot

was sent flying toward the craft, and buried itself in the hull.

Then the little vessel ran up into the wind and lay to, while the schooner came dashing down toward her with a look of mischief about her, that it was by no means pleasant to observe.

A few moments after the schooner luffed up, and a boat put off from her side and rowed swiftly toward the prize.

In the boat were half a dozen oarsmen, a coxswain, and a huge form in uniform sat in the stern sheets.

The latter was a man whose like is not often met with, for his face gave indication of strength of character, as much as did his body of physical power and endurance.

He was dressed in a black uniform, trimmed with gold lace, and wore a *chapeau* encircled by a coil of rope, which had the appearance of a hangman's knot, or gallows hemp.

He was armed with a huge pair of pistols, stuck in a red silk sash, and a cutlass swung at his side, which few men could have wielded, so heavy was it.

Springing on board he suddenly confronted the skipper, and then his eyes falling upon the monk and nuns, he bowed low, removed his hat and crossed himself devoutly, while he said in a deep voice:

"I recognized not that you carry holy passengers, skipper: but discovering the fact, I release your craft unharmed, for though known as the Sea Monster and a pirate, I am a pious man."

With this he was about to retreat, when the monk stepped forward and said:

"A word with you, my son, in the cabin."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INTERVIEW IN THE CABIN.

THE pirate, who had announced himself as the Sea Monster, a name that suited his deeds as well as his size, followed the monk into the cabin of the little vessel without a word.

Motioning the pirate to a seat, the monk took one opposite to him, and said:

"Senor, you are known to me."

"I made myself known, padre, when I told you that I was the Sea Monster."

"Yes, but we have met before."

"I do not recall when or where."

"Allow me to refresh your memory."

"Certainly."

"You are an Englishman."

"I cannot deny that."

"Born of noble parents, and you were forced to leave—"

"Senor Padre, we will not discuss the past, if it please you," said the pirate, in his deep, stern tones.

"Then let me say that you were wrecked upon an island in the Gulf, upon which dwelt a witch, and you became her slave for years."

"Breaking her bonds at last, you went to New Orleans, and through the aid of a money-lender there secured a vessel and became the pirate you now are."

"You do, indeed, know me, Senor Padre; but tell me how it is that you are aware of all this regarding me?"

"It matters not; but I wish to know of you the truth when I ask you certain questions."

"I will tell you the truth, Senor Padre."

"What know you of that Witch of the Isle and her past life?"

"Next to nothing."

"She dwelt there alone, then, until you went ashore there on a wreck?"

"Yes, excepting having for company birds of ill-omen and a pack of bloodhounds."

"And that was all?"

"After awhile, in another wreck that came ashore, she recognized in one whom she would have slain, for she killed all who escaped death by the sea, one who was her son."

"Her son?" and the padre started.

"Yes, she beheld a secret mark upon him that told her that he was her son, for she had tattooed it there herself."

"Thus she spared him."

"And where are they now?"

"I believe on another island, in fact they are there."

"They are not."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, they are in New Orleans."

"You know this, Senor Padre?"

"Yes."

"I believed them on an island in the Gulf, where they were luring vessels to destruction by false beacons."

"You are mistaken, for they are in New Orleans."

"Well, I care nothing for them."

"But I do."

"You, padre?"

"Yes."

"What are they to you?"

"It matters not; but I wish you to serve me."

"I always am ready to serve a holy man."

"You will be more so when I tell you that you shall have gold by the thousands if you do as I ask?"

"A padre able to pay so well for work?" asked the pirate, in surprise.

"Yes, I am able and willing to pay."

"You have but to command me, Senor Padre."

"Where are you bound now?"

"Where the winds carry me."

"After prizes?"

"Yes."

"I will send you on a given course."

"I am ready."

"It is that you go to New Orleans and ferret out the abiding-place of that witch and her son."

"Yes, padre."

"Kidnap them both, carry them to your vessel, and land them on one of the Bahama Islands."

"Yes, padre."

"Tell them that you leave them there to die, without food, without a plank to aid them to escape their fate, by order of one whom they deemed dead, and that they have killed."

"Shall I tell them who this one is?"

"Yes."

"And who, padre?"

"Tell them that it is Don Rudolpho, the money-lender of New Orleans."

"Ah! it is for that man then that you seek redress, Senor Padre."

"Yes."

"And he pays for it?"

"Yes."

"Then he should pay well, for he has the riches of a king."

"He will pay well."

"How much?"

"What is it worth to you?"

"Say ten thousand dollars for the woman, and half as much for the son."

"You shall have the price."

"When?"

"I will pay you five thousand now, and ten thousand when you bring me proof that you have carried out my plan."

"Where will I find you?"

"At St. Augustine."

"I will come there, and who shall I ask for?"

"Ask for Rudolph Ramon."

"He is known there?"

"I will be there."

"You will be?"

"Yes, for I am not the priest you deem me."

"Ha!"

"No, I am one whom you will recognize, when you bring me word that you have left that witch and her son to die upon an island in the Bahamas."

"Now go on your way, and I will sail for Pensacola, and thence to St. Augustine."

"Here is your gold as a pledge of my good faith."

"Adios, Senor Sea Monster."

The monk bowed and the pirate arose and left the cabin.

He glanced fixedly at the nuns as he passed them, raised his hat in silence, and getting into his boat pulled rapidly back to his schooner, which at once stood away on its course for New Orleans, while the little craft, which had escaped from a buccaneer's red clutches, held on for Pensacola, where had been its original destination.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RACE AT SEA.

I MUST now return to the youth, who, the reader will remember, believed that he had accomplished a deep revenge against one whom he felt had wronged his kindred and himself beyond repair.

It will be remembered that the boy had the sachel of money, which he had been sent to the bank for, and closing the trap upon the money-lender when he was down in his gold vault, he believed that he must die there, and thus would be he avenged.

With the money in his possession, he determined to seek his little sister far and wide; for he could not believe that the money-lender had put her to death.

Something in his heart told him that she lived, and as the money-lender had robbed his father of his fortune and driven his mother to despair and death, he did not feel that he was doing wrong in using the money he had thus obtained.

His little sister had been kidnapped and carried off, and from that time he had heard nothing of her.

Without money he had searched for her as best he could; but with the gold he had come in possession of, and which was a goodly fortune to him, he could work with hope of good results.

His service with the money-lender had shown him that that personage never carried large sums of gold or bank-notes about him, but instead, kept his riches in jewels, which could be readily secreted about his clothing.

This he determined to do, and at once; so he sought a dealer in precious stones, and pretending to make the purchases for Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, in whose employ he was known to be, he bought those that would serve him best.

Leaving out a few bills for immediate use, the youth determined to lose no time in beginning work.

In his former search he had discovered that his little sister had been taken to Mobile, and there had been given into the hands of some fishermen, and from thence all trace was lost of her.

Now, his first duty was to go to Mobile, and he took passage on a vessel bound there as soon as he could lay all his plans of action to his own satisfaction.

The vessel he sailed on was a brig, a fast sailer, and carried a rich cargo, a few guns and a small crew, for she depended more upon her speed than her means of defense for protection from rovers.

Leaving New Orleans with the belief that he had killed the money-lender, and thus avenged the wrongs he had done his parents, he was full of hope that he would be able to trace his sister, hard as the task seemed, insurmountable as appeared the obstacles in his way.

The brig sailed merrily out upon the waters of the Gulf, her captain and crew little dreading capture from any foe, with their gallant craft so often tried in death-chases, always to escape.

But adverse winds met her, a gale blew her off her course for many leagues, and when at last she was able to point her bows for her destination with a fair breeze, and in her favor, she was days behind her usual run.

The youth, Bono, had proven himself through all a thorough sailor, and ever ready to lend a helping hand, he had become a favorite with officers and crew alike.

He had distinguished himself by going aloft to splice some broken rigging, at a time when no seaman cared to leave the deck, so fearful was the storm, and the captain had then said to him:

"My young friend, you have it in your power to tread a quarter-deck, as commander, before very long."

"I hope, sir, some day to be a captain," was the modest reply.

"Better ship with me, and work your way up."

"My word for it you will soon be my first mate, and stand ready to step into my shoes," remarked the kind-hearted captain.

"I wish that I could do so, sir; but I have at present an important duty to perform, and I can only look for work when that is done," sadly responded the boy.

"You are very young to talk of important duties to perform, as though your life depended upon its accomplishment."

"Yes, sir, I am young in years, but old in experience, for I have seen much, very much of the world."

The captain was more and more interested in his young passenger, and stood regarding him attentively, when Bono suddenly sung out in clear tones:

"Sail ho!"

"You have keen eyes, my young friend, to see a sail that the lookout has not discovered, and which I cannot make out."

"There, sir, just rising on that wave, and square off the weather quarter."

"Ah! I catch it now—ho aloft there, don't you see that sail, or are you asleep?"

"Ay, ay, sir, just sighted her," answered the lookout from the mast head.

"What do you make her out from aloft there?"

"A craft I have seen in the lake and river, sir, at New Orleans."

"She is a yacht, and owned upon the Sound shores by a rich young planter that is now a middy in the navy," said the lookout, speaking very slowly, as he held his glass to his eye and kept it upon the craft in sight.

"Ah! I remember now; his name is Brandt, and he rendered the Government such good service that he was given a commission."

"If it is his craft, she's fast as the wind; but we will show him what the Flying Feather can do with him," and the captain seemed to feel just pride in his vessel.

In the mean time the strange sail arose rapidly, and had changed its course so as to head toward a given point, which made her run almost parallel with the brig, though verging toward her all the time.

"She is more than holding her own, captain," said the youth, as he saw the stranger's splendid pace over the waters.

"Egad! but you are right!"

"Ho, lads! set more cloth on the Feather, and we'll show that fellow how we can drop him!"

This order was obeyed; but notwithstanding, the stranger still gained, and at the same time drew nearer the brig broadside.

In a little while it became very evident that the stranger was outsailing the fleet brig, and the captain asked nervously of the lookout:

"Are you sure, Lemon, that she is the armed yacht you said she was?"

"Yes, sir, I am sure, and her name is the Sea Owl."

"I see a small flag at her fore, sir, a white owl upon a blue field," said Bono.

"Ah, yes, I see it now, and there goes her flag—the American," and the American colors went flying to the peak of the stranger, which came on at the same dashing pace she had held since she had been first discovered.

"He seems to want to speak to us, and if he does, he has got to do what no other craft can do—catch us."

"I believe that he will do it, captain," returned the youth with a smile.

"I believe you are right, my boy, though I would not have believed it possible," and the captain now narrowly watched the race, for such it had become, between his pretty brig and the saucy yacht, that was outfooting her in such fine style.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SEA CHASE.

A FEW hours after the discovery of the stranger, the captain of the Flying Feather had the mortification of seeing the yacht forge within easy hailing distance of him, in spite of all he could do to make his fleet brig hold her own.

The stranger was certainly a beautiful craft, from bow to stern, hull to truck, and had the appearance of being as stanch as she was fast, for she stood well up under a heavy pressure of canvas, that might have laid a much larger vessel well over on her side.

There were four guns visible on board, two of these being eighteens, one forward, the other aft, and mounted on pivots, which gave the advantage of aiding a broadside.

Amidships, for broadside guns, were two twelves, and the masts were encircled by racks, in which there were small-arms of various sizes.

A crew of some thirty men, in the American navy dress, were visible forward, with here and there the black face of a negro, who evidently served as cook, steward or cabin-boy on board.

Upon the quarter-deck were four persons, the three, besides the man at the wheel, being in officers' uniform, though not one of the trio had seemed to reach the age of twenty, and were no higher rank upon his shoulder than that of midshipman.

The striking one of this trio of young officers was a youth, seemingly in his teens, but with a superb physique, and a face that was noble, winning and fearless.

That he was every inch a man, in spite of his years, his every feature revealed.

He was armed with a pair of pistols in his belt, and a handsome sword swung at his left hip.

The eyes of all upon the brig rested on him, for his fame was known to them as the Midshipman Planter, who had been commissioned in the navy, and ordered in his own yacht, armed and manned, to serve as a coast-guard in the Gulf.

When but a short distance separated the two vessels the young midshipman sprang nimbly upon the bulwarks, and, seizing the ratlines, called out, in a voice as clear and ringing as a bugle-note:

"Ho, the brig, ahoy!"

"Ahoy, the Sea Owl!" answered the brig's captain.

"I recognized you as a packet between New Orleans and the coast towns, so ran down to warn you to keep a bright look-out for the Sea Monster, a pirate that is now making the Gulf the scene of his red deeds."

"I thank you, sir, and I have heard of the fellow; but I am bound for Mobile, and my brig is too fast for any of the nimble rovers to catch, though I again thank you."

"Your brig is a fast one; but the Sea Monster's schooner is also fleet as the wind, for I was myself chased by him for a day and part of the night, and barely escaped capture."

"I thank you, sir, and will be on my guard, for if he can hurry that flying-machine you command, he can catch the Feather, and no mistake."

"It is well to give him as wide a berth as you can."

"Good-day, sir!" and the yacht glided ahead, coolly crossed the bows of the brig, and held on her way as before.

As she grew dim in the distance, the youth again called out:

"Sail, ho!"

"Ha! Whereaway this time, my sail-sighter?"

"Dead astern, sir; and it is a schooner that has crept upon us rapidly while we have been watching the Sea Owl."

"By Neptune's beard! but you are right."

"Ho, aloft there!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"I'll get you a pair of spectacles, as you seem blind!" shouted the captain in angry tones; and the lookout, half dozing under the influence of the afternoon sun, awoke to the fact that he had woefully neglected his duty.

The strange craft was at once seen to be in chase of the brig, and she was coming on at a slipping pace.

"There is the trouble in commanding a fleet vessel, young sir; the crew get careless, and neglect their duties, trusting in the speed of their

craft to help them out; but yonder fellow comes on as though he meant business, and we must see what he is."

"I know the craft, sir," said the man at the wheel.

"Well, Trinon, what is he?"

"You remember the schooner that belonged to that pirate known as the Sea Ghoul, cap'n?" asked the helmsman.

"Yes, she was captured, and turned into a Government craft."

"So, cap'n, and then cut out of her anchorage by another pirate, and yonder is the craft."

"Take the glass, captain, and you'll see a giant form upon her quarter-deck," and the youth handed the captain his glass, who, turning it upon the schooner, said quickly:

"You are right, my lad; he towers far above the heads of his helmsmen, as he stands near them; and he it is that is known as the Sea Monster."

"Now we will see what the Feather can do to drop him."

At once orders were given to set all the canvas the brig could make draw, and she went bowling swiftly along.

The sun was now nearing the horizon, and its rays fell brightly upon the schooner, now less than a league astern.

It was a craft that no seaman could fail to admire, and she drove through the water without a "bone in her teeth," her bows cutting the waves like a knife.

Jibs, mainsail and foresail were set, and with them she had been gaining upon the brig.

It was to be seen what she could do, after the brig set her extra sail.

"The brig holds her own, my lads," said the captain, merrily.

"Yes, sir, but the schooner is setting her topsails, and—"

"And is gaining; by Jupiter! that I should meet two craft in one day that show their heels to the Feather."

"Ho, men! the brig must do better than this, for yonder fellow in our wake is the Sea Monster, and woe be unto us if he catches us."

The words of their captain set the crew to work, the sails were trimmed more closely, the lower canvas was wet to make it better, three men went to the wheel, and everything that could be done, was done to make the brig do her best.

"She still gains, sir," said Mark Bonodel, whom the reader will remember bore the name of Bono, when he had been in the money-lender's employ.

"You are right, and it looks black for us," sadly said the captain.

"You have not force enough to resist him, sir?"

"No, my guns are small, as you see, and my crew just enough to man the brig."

"We have always trusted in her speed, and done so now, I fear, once too often."

"You might set her afire, sir, and take your boats, so that the Sea Monster would not get the vessel or her freight."

"If the land was near, that we might reach it, I would do this; but here we would be picked up and every one of us strung up to the yard-arm for losing the prize to the pirate."

"Yes, sir; but if report says true of him, he'll hang us anyhow."

"Ah! right again, and, if it comes to the worst I will fire the ship and take to the boats, trying to dodge the accursed pirate in the darkness, so pray that night may come rapidly on; but see! he gains rapidly on us, and by dark will not be far astern," and the captain again turned his glass upon the rover craft, that was coming in his wake like a bloodhound on a trail, and as merciless as one.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE YOUNG SAILOR'S PLOT.

IT soon became a question with all on board, how short a time after darkness fell upon the sea, before the schooner overhauled the brig, and what doom would there befall them.

All on board felt their danger, and their faces showed it, with one exception, and that one was Mark Bonodel.

If he realized that the pirate might put him to death, he did not show the realization in his face, and the crew could not but speak of his wonderful nerve.

As he stood by the side of the captain, watching with him the coming schooner, the youth said:

"Can a boy make a suggestion, sir?"

"Yes, certainly, my lad, for you are a boy with a very old head, and you have a nerve that many a man might envy you."

"So out with it, Master Bono."

"Well, sir, it is very evident that the schooner will catch us."

"It is about an assured fact, my lad."

"We may have an hour after dark, and perhaps not as long."

"Yes."

"It is clouding up, and the night will be dark."

"True."

"Then, sir, as soon as it is dark, you can get

two of the boats ready, with provisions, sails and all you will need, and, as we sail along drop one, and then, lashing the helm, and putting out a drag, to hold the brig on her course as long as possible, drop the other boat; but before departing set the vessel on fire in the hold and cabin."

"The very thing, my boy," cried the captain with enthusiasm.

"The two boats will readily escape the eyes of the pirates, sir, who will be watching the brig, and when she luffs up and lays to of her own accord, they will think you have surrendered, and in this sea will not attempt to board, but run down near, lay to, and send a boat to the brig, when, finding her deserted and on fire, they will try to save her, giving us all this time to escape to a distance where they can not see us."

"Bono, you were born for the quarter-deck, and your plan shall be carried out to the letter."

"You shall command one boat, and my mates shall go with me in the other, and we'll try and keep together."

"You go in the boat that first leaves the brig, and I will send with you the pick of my crew," and the honest old captain grasped the hand of the boy, in a manner that showed he was not above being guided by one his junior by two-score years.

It was now nearly sunset, and to gain all the time he could, the captain pushed the brig in every way that was possible, and made every effort to secure as long a time after dark as he was able to do.

The plan of the boy was made known to the mates and crew, and Bono was given credit for it by the gallant captain, while the men could hardly be restrained from giving him a cheer.

The stores, sails and oars for the two boats were all brought on deck ready to be put into them as soon as it grew dark, and all small articles of much value that could be taken were gotten together.

Then men were sent below decks to prepare material for setting the brig on fire in a dozen different places, so that once the flames got headway there would be no checking their progress.

As the cabin companionway and hatches were to be left firmly closed, the fire would not burst out until the boats had gotten a long way off from the brig.

"It seems a cruel way of ending even a pirate's life, sir; but the powder on board might be placed in the companionway, so that when it was opened the flames would burst out that way and send the brig to atoms," suggested Bono.

"Bravo, my boy! We can kill even in our dying agony, and perhaps send the Sea Monster himself to the depths below!" cried the captain, and then he added:

"You and I will at once arrange this little game ourselves, and then woe be unto the red sea rover that sets his foot upon the dear old Feather's deck!"

Instantly Captain Gray and Mark Bonodel set about carrying out their little plan, and when they had completed it to their satisfaction, darkness had fallen upon the waters.

They had so laid a train that, from the place where the fire would be kindled, the moment the companionway was opened the flames would find vent that way, lick up the powder, and thus reaching the kegs would blow the brig to atoms.

"It seems hard, sir," said Bono, almost repenting of his plot.

"It will be a more merciful death than they would give us if they caught us, Bono, and their red deeds demand a fearful punishment. But, oh! how it hurts me to meet two vessels in the same day that can outfoot the Feather, when I did not believe the keel was laid that could do it!"

And the captain's sorrow was greater that his vessel had been beaten in speed than for the fate he had laid for the Sea Monster and his crew.

As it was now dark, the boats were stored with the things laid on deck for them, and the crews of each were assigned to them.

They were to be lowered from the forward davits, and the crew to be ready, with their oars muffled, to dash them into the water the moment the painter was cast loose.

They were to pull with all speed directly away from the course of the brig, and trust to luck not to be seen by the pirates.

As he stood watching the schooner, which was now less than half a league astern, and dimly in the brig's wake, Bono said:

"Captain, if you opened fire from your stern guns on the pirate, after each flash our decks would be cast in deeper gloom for an instant, and thus the better conceal the departure of the boats."

"When you fire the last gun, the boat might be towing with all in it ready, so that the man who lights the match could rush amidships and spring in."

"Right again, my lad."

"Clear those stern guns for action!" cried Captain Gray, and it was done at once, the crew working with a will.

The brig then opened fire upon the schooner, although the distance was yet too great to be effective.

Of course all expected to see the pirate savagely return the fire; but his hull remained dark, and his guns kept silent.

"Now, Bono, get your crew into your boat and be off."

"Pull directly on the course I have given you, and I will follow suit and we will meet at a given point."

"Good-by, my lad, for the present, and luck to you."

"I wish I was to go in the last boat, sir; but I will not urge it, and I thank you for the confidence placed in me," answered the youth, and he grasped the hand of the honest captain, and went forward followed by his crew.

The men, seven in number got into the boat, and then Bono followed them.

"Stand ready there, coxswain, to let go when I give the order, and you, lads, have your oars ready to let fall at the proper time," ordered the youth, and in chorus from the men came a respectful:

"Ay, ay, sir."

A few moments thus passed, the brig rushing on, but slightly retarded by the towing boat, so that the schooner was gaining rapidly.

Then came the flash of one, and then of the other of the two stern howitzers, and in the darkness that followed the glare the command came from Bono:

"Let go the painted, coxswain!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

Instantly the boat was free, and went dancing sternward upon the waves.

"Good-by and good luck!" called out the captain, as the boat swept astern.

"Thank you, sir! let fall, lads, and give way with a will!" cried Bono, and the blades went deep and sent the boat flying straight off from the brig's wake out upon the darkness of the rough waters, for the seven-knot breeze was working up considerable of a sea.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRAP WELL LAID.

THE Flying Feather dashed on her way, and a moment of intense suspense followed to those in the boat, and also to those on the brig.

Would the pirates discover the boat?

If so, would she fire on it, or send a boat in chase, while the schooner held on after the brig?

Such were the thoughts of Captain Gray.

Mark Bonodel and their respective companions. But there came no sign from on board the pirate schooner to show that the boat had been seen, and swiftly, with their muffled oars, and bending low at their task, the crew rowed away to get as far as possible from the course of the buccaneer.

Having seen the first boat safely started, Captain Gray lost no time in making his arrangements for his own departure.

The drag was thrown over to hold the brig on her course, the helm was lashed and the fires kindled in the various spots selected for them, while the boat was launched and towed alongside.

Then the stern guns were fired together, and in the darkness that followed the flashes the men scrambled into the boat, seized their oars, and the tow-line was cut.

Instantly the boat was dancing upon the waves, but gaining headway under the powerful pull at the blades, moved swiftly out of the course between the pursued and pursuing vessels.

The night was fortunately dark, and not expecting a trick of the kind, and watching the brig, rather than the waters, the second boat appeared to escape unseen, also.

Rushing on like a race-horse, the schooner now gained rapidly on the brig, the drag retarding her progress, and forcing her to sail loggy.

As the pirate drew nearer, a bright flash came from his bows and a shot went flying after the brig.

By a strange coincidence the iron messenger struck the drag, cutting it loose, and the brig, catching a wave upon her bows luffed up sharp, while a cheer broke from the pirates at, as they supposed, the quick obedience to their summons to come to.

A few moments after the schooner bore down, as though about to throw her crew on board the brig; but the rough sea evidently made her commander think better of this, and he lay to, and sent a boat crowded with men on board.

The boat reached the side of the brig, and the men were scrambling over the side, when the Sea Monster captain, who was watching the prize attentively, suddenly saw a flame burst out amidships.

Instantly the light revealed to him that the brig was on fire and deserted, and in thunder tones he shouted:

"Ho, men! back to your boat and pull for your lives!"

"Lively! for there is a trap laid for you!"

But the officer in charge had already reached the companionway, and his men, cutlass in hand, were crowding after him.

And too late the warning, for the smothered flames forced their way out, the companionway was burst open, and then the brig's stern was seen crowded, a volume of smoke and flame rolled from her, followed by a crash that shook the sea, and the gallant craft was shattered to atoms, while riggings, spars, timber and splinters were hurled upon all sides.

A cry here, a groan there, a blow, a jar, and it was shown that the schooner was not so far away but that the brig's debris was hurled against her, killing and wounding several of her crew.

The Sea Monster saw that his vessel was not materially harmed, and that he was unhurt, while his men crouched in momentary terror to the deck.

Then he heard the splashes of timbers of the brig falling into the water, and knew that not one of his boat's crew lived.

A moment he stood in silence, and then he thundered forth:

"Men, the crew of that craft escaped in their boats, so they cannot be far away, and we must find them."

"Once in my power, woe be unto them."

"Ho there, lads! get the schooner under way, and, helmsman, our course lies in a circle, gradually widening as we sail."

"On deck there! let every man keep watch, and a thousand dollars to the one who first discovers a boat."

The men were revengeful, and the golden bait offered by their chief made them more than anxious to discover their foes, who had placed so clever a trap for them, and also cheated them of their rich prize.

At once the schooner began to move through the waters, laying her course as much as possible in a circle, which constantly widened.

An hour thus passed, and then in the deep basso notes of the Sea Monster captain came the cry:

"Boat ho!"

A cheer broke from the crew, though all were disappointed that their chief had been the one to find the boat instead of one of their number.

"There she lies, helmsman! three points off the port bow."

"Head for her!"

The schooner was at once headed for the boat, and the crew, now catching sight of the dark object upon the waters, a mile distant, broke forth in another cheer that had a ring of revenge in it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CLEVER SCHEME.

THE boat in which Mark Bonodel had left the brig, held bravely on its way over the rough waters, and the youth and his crew were glad to see that they had escaped the keen eyes of the pirates.

Watching, they saw that the second boat must have also left the Flying Feather, and at the flash of the gun from the schooner's bows, they were greatly surprised that the brig luffed up so sharp, fearing that some accident had occurred to keep the crew yet remaining on board, for they did not know that the shot had cut loose the drag.

Still keeping his eye upon the brig through his glass the youth saw the schooner run down and lay to near the prize, and then the boat put off.

What followed, all distinctly beheld, and they could hardly repress a cheer at the trap the pirates had been caught in, and the escape of their comrades.

But, what the schooner would do next became an anxious question in their minds, as they were yet in dangerous proximity to the pirates.

This question the movements of the schooner soon answered, and the youth said:

"She is searching for us, comrades, and we are in for it, if we cannot avoid them."

Pulling hard the men became anxious to place as much space as possible between themselves and the schooner, while Bono generously said:

"Comrades, we might as well lead her as far as possible from the other boat, for her course will take us in port, if either is to be discovered."

"Put your helm to starboard, coxswain, and we'll see if we cannot get out of the circle the schooner is trying to catch us in."

This order was obeyed, and the boat turned off in an almost oblique direction from her former course, and steadily pushed on her way.

But the schooner widened her circle, and a moment after headed directly for the boat.

"We are discovered, men," coolly said Bono.

The oars stopped rowing as though by order, while one man groaned:

"We are lost!"

"It seems so; but while life lasts there is hope."

"Pull hard again, men, and we'll lead the schooner as far from the other boat as possible, so her luck can be better than ours, if we can thus help them."

"What do we care for them, if we have to die?" said a seaman sullenly.

"Yes, let them meet the same fate," added another.

"This is unmanly, my men, and not worthy of you."

"They took the chances with us, and ill-fortune caught us, and we should help them to escape all in our power."

"Besides, I believe I can work a little plan to save us."

A query came from the men in chorus, as to what that plan was, for they had faith in the youth, and caught at a straw of hope, like a drowning man, though what he could do to extricate them from their peril they could not imagine.

"Yes, I have an idea that I can keep our necks out of the noose," continued Bono.

"As how, sir?" asked the coxswain.

"Well, I worked in New Orleans for a money-lender, who had dealings with pirates, and befriended them."

"The Sea Monster, as they now call the man who commands yonder schooner, I have met at the office of the money-lender, and he saw me there."

"He was then known as the Giant Captain, for, I saw him through my glass this afternoon, and am sure he is the same one."

"Now, I shall tell him that the brig was richly freighted, and belonged to the money-lender, and that we did not know that he would be a friend, so fled from him."

"You must pretend to be outlaws, sea-rovers, and I will be the money-lender's clerk still, and we will escape that way, for he will not harm us."

"We can also offer to ship with him, and get away as chance allows us to do; but we must try and get as far as possible from the other boat, and not have it taken, and the crew tell a different story, to conflict with ours."

"But, should they be captured, then we must say that they were the legitimate crew of the brig, while we were in the employ of the money-lender, and I will secretly make this known to him."

"Now, lads, pull with all speed, as we are now receding, and every stroke puts us further from Captain Gray's boat."

The crew now felt full reliance upon their young leader, and with the aid of Bono and the coxswain, taking a hand at the oars to rest the others, they kept up a steady pace that drew them further and further away from the other boat, though the schooner again gained rapidly upon them.

In half an hour more the schooner came sweeping up astern, and luffing sharp, the deep notes of the Sea Monster were heard:

"Ahoy, that boat!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" answered Bono.

"Come alongside on my lee quarter!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" and five minutes after Bono and his mates stood on the deck of the pirate craft.

"Who commands here?"

"I do, Captain English," said Bono.

"Ha! you call me by name?" and the giant laid his heavy hand upon the youth's shoulder.

"Yes, sir, and had I been sure it was you, our brig would not have been lost, and the crew need not have fled."

"Boy, I have seen you before."

"Who and what are you?" and the pirate gazed fixedly into the face upturned to him, as though to read there in the darkness where he had before seen the youth.

"We have met before, captain, and when and where, and who I am, I will make known to you, if you will grant me a moment in your cabin."

"Let the schooner lie as she is, Tabor."

"Follow me, boy!" and the Sea Monster led the way to his cabin.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SEVERE PENALTY.

"Now, boy, where have we met before?" and the huge pirate chief turned his fixed gaze upon Bono, as he motioned him to a seat under the glare of the cabin lamp.

Bono was perfectly cool, and gazed upon the remarkable looking man before him without the slightest trepidation.

He had never before known a human being so large in stature, and a man who seemed to be such a grand specimen of manhood, and the boy could not but wonder that one who was so noble looking had become so vile.

Unflinchingly he gazed the chief in the face, and said quietly:

"You know Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, Senor Captain, I believe?"

"Aha! it was at his office I saw you, boy," quickly cried the Sea Monster.

"It was, sir, for I am in his service."

"Then why did you not show his colors this afternoon, and—"

"I did not know, Captain English, that your schooner was commanded by one who was Don Rudolpho's friend; nor did I recognize in the one the crew said was the Sea Monster the one I had known as the Giant Captain."

"I am not surprised, young man; but what is your name?"

"Bono, sir."

"Yes—I remember. But it is unfortunate

that the Don lost his vessel and her cargo, though he is well able to sustain the loss.

"But you played me a trick that nearly cost me my life, for I half intended to board the brig myself, yet thought better of it and sent an under officer."

"I am glad that you did not, sir; but the captain, looking upon you as a foe, did all he could to thwart you and harm you."

"And succeeded well, I assure you; but where is your captain?"

"He left the brig in the other boat, sir."

"How many men has he with him?"

"Half a score, sir."

"And which way did he head?"

"Due north, sir," and Bono gave the opposite direction from the right one.

"You were steering south when I sighted you."

"Yes, sir; we were trying to dodge you, and then put about and sent the other boat at a given point."

"Well, I need some men, as I have not a large crew, and your men can ship with me, while I will see that you are well taken care of, and if you will give up service under the money-lender, and take a berth with me as an under officer, you shall have it."

"Thank you, sir, I shall be only too glad; but I must report to the Don first."

"That you shall do, for I am going straight to New Orleans now."

"So come on deck, bid your men go to work, and then direct the helmsman how to steer to find your other boat, and the brig's captain shall step into the shoes of my luff, whom he blew to Hades on his vessel."

There was nothing left for the youth to do but obey, and going on deck with the Giant Chief, he told the boat's crew that their services would be accepted on board the schooner.

He then was about to direct the helmsman which way to steer, so that there would be little chance of their finding the other boat, when suddenly came from the mast-head:

"Boat, ho!"

"Ha! we have found it."

"Whereaway, my man?" called out the Sea Monster, in his deep tones.

The schooner had just gotten under way once more, and in response the lookout answered:

"Dead astern as we head now, sir."

"Ay, ay! I see her."

"Put about, helmsman!" came the order, and turning to the youth, the Giant Chief continued:

"You doubtless got turned around in your bearings, my lad, for you were heading us away from the boat."

"So it seems, sir," coolly answered Bono, while his boat's crew felt anxious at the discovery of the other boat, and wondered if their brave young shipmate could rescue them from this second threatened danger.

The schooner had now put about, and was laying close into the wind, to reach the boat on that tack, if possible.

As she sped along Bono saw that half an hour more must result in the picking up of his messmates, and he wondered how it would end.

But he did not lose nerve, and quickly glanced out over the dark waters, while the chief paced to and fro near him.

As he looked his eyes suddenly fell upon a sail, dimly seen through the gloom, and heading directly for the boat.

It was a mile from the schooner, was the strange sail, yet not more than a fourth of that distance from the boat, which held on its way, pulling hard, as though no one in it had yet discovered the sail off of their starboard quarter.

Raising his glass to his eye, Bono discerned at a glance that the strange sail was the armed yacht of the Planter Midshipman, which had spoken them the day before, and given them warning of the presence of the Sea Monster in those waters.

Knowing the speed of the Sea Owl, he felt hope that she would pick up the boat, in which were Captain Gray and his men, and escape with them.

He saw that the armed yacht was heading directly for the boat, and going at a slapping pace.

Those on board had evidently discovered the boat, and also the schooner, and to save the former she was risking very dangerous proximity to her large enemy the pirate.

That the lookout on the schooner had not yet discovered the armed yacht, was very evident by his silence, so, as she must soon be seen, Bono decided to get the credit of sighting her, and so sung out in his clear voice:

"Sail ho!"

The Giant Captain instantly stopped in his walk, and turned toward the youth, while he said:

"Ha! your sharp eyes discovering from the deck, what that blind lookout cannot see from aloft?"

"Where is she, my lad?"

Bono pointed to the strange sail, and discovering her close proximity, the huge chief seemed wild with rage, while he shouted:

"Ha! almost upon us, and yonder lookout not discover her?"

"She is but a little fellow that we need not fear; but had it been a line-of-battle ship we would have been lost."

"Ho, lad! I'll try the mettle of your men, so get them together, arm them with muskets, and bring them aft."

Bono was a little surprised at this order, for he could not make out just what the Sea Monster meant.

Did he mean to board the yacht, if he could overhaul her, and throw him and his boat's crew on board to capture her?

If so, he certainly was preparing a long ways ahead, considering that little craft was such a nimble sailer.

Anyhow he did not hesitate about obeying the orders given him, and going forward soon returned with his men all armed with muskets.

Saluting in silence the youth stood before the huge captain, who said sternly:

"My lad, I make it a rule on board my vessel never to allow neglect of duty to go unpunished, and I shall not in this case make an exception."

"Yonder lookout at the mast-head might have lost me my schooner, and all of us our lives at the yard-arm, had that craft proven to be a large vessel-of-war, so he shall meet death as punishment for not keeping his eyes open."

Bono was amazed, as were his men at this prompt and summary determination of the pirate chief to punish the neglectful lookout, but he said nothing, and the giant continued:

"As you know my intentions, and you are the executioner, order your men to fire upon him!"

"In his place there, sir?" asked Bono in surprise.

"Yes."

"Without a warning of his fate?"

"Yes."

"Or time for a prayer?"

"Yes."

"You know best, sir," coolly returned the youth, and turning to his men he continued:

"Ready, men! aim at yonder lookout in the maintop!"

The men obeyed in silence, for they dared not disobey, and then came the stern command from the lips of the boy:

"Fire!"

A volley of musketry followed, and the unfortunate lookout came tumbling to the deck with a wild shriek ringing from his lips.

CHAPTER XX.

A HOT CHASE.

WITH a dull thud, that was sickening to all who heard it, the lookout fell to the deck, amid his shipmates, who, all used as they were to scenes of carnage and crime stood aghast at the act of their chief.

"Your men are not the best of shots, my lad, or they would have done better work, for the bullets merely made him let go his hold and the fall to the deck killed him," said the pirate chief with the utmost coolness after the deadly punishment he had visited upon the unfortunate lookout who had neglected his duty.

Then raising his voice, he continued:

"Throw that body overboard, and send another lookout aloft, and one who can keep awake!"

The two orders were quickly obeyed, and seemed to break the spell that had fallen upon the crew.

A plunge into the waves and the body had its burial, while a nimble seaman ran up the ratlines and took his place in the cross-trees, almost instantly hailing the deck with:

"Ho the deck!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" shouted back the chief.

"Yonder vessel, sir, is the armed yacht, Sea Owl, which we have twice before chased."

"Ay, ay, my man, so I see."

"And she is hailing the boat, sir, which just now seemed to sight her."

"Ay, ay," shouted the Sea Monster, and then his voice rung out with:

"Forward there at the guns!"

"Fire on the boat, and upon the cruiser too, and man your guns lively, for if we can not wound yonder craft, we will have a bad fellow to catch!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came from the officer in command of the bow-guns.

But, nimbly as the men worked, before a gun was fired, there came three flashes from the broadside of the yacht, and simultaneously three solid shot were flying toward the schooner.

"Ha! he hits first! and well aimed too," cried the Sea Monster, as the shot cut through his rigging, and killed one of his crew.

"Fire!" he yelled, and the bow guns flashed and their discharge shook the schooner.

But the bows rose on a wave as the guns were discharged, and the iron flew far above the yacht, doing no harm.

The boat, which had before been pulling a straight course, seemingly not having discovered either the pirate or the little cruiser, was now rowing with all speed toward the latter.

"Let them both have it!" yelled the Sea

Monster, and again the bow-guns were fired, and when the boat was within a few fathoms of the yacht.

A crash followed, and Bono, who was watching through his glass, cried:

"That shot hit the boat, sir, and her crew are in the water."

"See! the yacht luffs right in the midst of the swimmers, and is picking them up!"

It was true, for ropes had been thrown to the crew of the boat, and it could be seen that those on the yacht were drawing them on board.

"Fire!" yelled the Sea Monster again, and the bow-guns kept up a constant discharge, though they seemed to be badly aimed, for their iron flew wild.

In the mean time the Sea Owl had put about, after rescuing all she could of the boat's crew, and, as she darted away in flight, began a hot fire from her stern pivot-gun upon the schooner.

The pivot-pieces mounted fore and aft on the yacht were large guns for a vessel so small, and they certainly were well manned, for the gunners did not throw away their ammunition, but threw the iron pretty much where they wanted it to go.

The result was the dismounting of the starboard bow-gun on the schooner, and the killing and wounding of several of the crew, followed immediately by the cutting away of the fore-topmast.

For a moment the schooner's crew were demoralized; but, rushing forward, the giant chief waved his cutlass, and his stentorian voice calmed the turmoil and repaired damages in very short order.

But the yacht had not been idle, and, under a pressure of canvas was flying away in a style that threatened to drop the pirate far astern.

Infuriated by the mishaps that had befallen him, and his courage rising in misfortune, the Sea Monster handled his vessel with a determination to redeem his ill fortune by capturing the yacht, and his crew sprung at his slightest order, well knowing that the demon was within him.

As for Bono and his men, they knew but too well the danger of doing aught to bring his displeasure upon them, and they attended to their duties with an alacrity that was equal to that of the pirate crew.

"Boy, perhaps you can pitch a shot on board that yacht that will fetch her to," suddenly cried the Sea Monster, turning to Bono.

"I can try, sir," was the ready reply, and the youth sprung to the gun, sighted it and fired.

The shot was a close one.

"A little too far to starboard, boy."

"Try again," cried the Sea Monster.

"Ay, ay, sir," and a second time Bono sighted the piece and fired.

"Now you are as much the other way."

"Aim between your two shots and you rake her from stern to bow."

"Ay, ay, captain," answered Bono, cheerily, and a third time the gun was aimed, the youth, as before, taking a long time to fire, for he saw that the yacht was gaining steadily.

"Fire!" yelled the Sea Monster, and the third shot went flying after the yacht.

It was seen to strike directly in the wake of the little vessel and then ricochet clean over her.

"You make the closest misses I ever saw, boy."

"I will try a shot," cried the Sea Monster, and he walked forward, just as there came a flash from the yacht's stern, and with a crash the bow-gun of the pirate was dismounted, crushing an unfortunate seaman beneath its weight, and wounding two others.

The wild shrieks of the man, thus pinned to the deck appalled even the pirates for a moment, and they stood aghast, until Bono called to those about him to aid in raising the gun from off his legs.

It was no easy task to accomplish, and the prayers and cries of the sufferer seemed to unnerve the men in their work, and they were bearing the poor wretch away, when the Sea Monster cried:

"His legs are crushed to atoms and he will never be of service more, so into the sea with him!"

The men bearing the dying pirate hesitated, while Bono cried earnestly:

"Oh, sir, you will not be so cruel."

"Yes, I will be so cruel; for he is dying, anyhow, and I do not wish my craft lumbered up with useless human timber."

"Into the sea with him, I say!"

"But, captain, I—"

"Silence, boy, or you shall follow him," shouted the maddened pirate, and the men, seeing that their chief was in no humor to trifle, and looking to their own safety, rolled the dying man over the bulwarks, when with a wild shriek, drowned by a heavy splash, he sunk beneath the waters.

"Luff there, helmsman! luff sharp! and starboard guns, there; give yonder flying devil a broadside!" shrieked the Sea Monster, breaking the spell that appalled his crew at his inhuman act to their comrade.

In obedience the schooner luffed sharp and the

starboard broadside was poured after the flying yacht.

But she sped on apparently unharmed, and in the crippled condition of the schooner, the Sea Monster felt that he would have to give up the chase, so he reluctantly gave the order to put away for New Orleans, greatly to the joy of Bono and his men at the escape of the daring little yacht, that had risked so much to rescue Captain Gray and his boat's crew.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WATER WOLVES MYSTIFIED.

MORNING broke clear and bracing upon the Bahamas after the fearful storm of the night, and at an early hour Wambold, the Water Wolf, as the chief of the little party on Death Rock Isle was known, started to take a survey of the beach, expecting to find wreckage and dead forms washing into the basin, for the current so set through the outer reefs, that a vessel dashed to pieces a half a league away would be driven through the rocky pass to the sandy beach of the basin.

To his surprise no wreckage and not a dead body met his view.

"She must have been driven high upon the reefs, and not gone to pieces."

"If so, her crew will be alive, and must be looked to."

"I will call the boy," he said to himself, after a walk around the sandy shore of the basin proved to him that there was not a piece of timber or a human being visible which the storm of the night before had cast up.

He was returning to the cabin to call the young wrecker, when he saw that handsome personage emerge from his quarters and come toward him.

"Much wreckage on shore, father?" asked the young wrecker.

"None," was the sullen reply.

"You surprise me."

"Yes, as I was surprised; but the craft must have been driven high upon the reefs and the waves could not get at her to break her up."

"Maybe; but no bodies?"

"None."

"This is strange."

"Yes, and I was just going to call you, that we might take a boat and go out and see the vessel."

"With this high sea still running, father, it would be risky, and we can see all from the cliff."

"You are right, Leo, for the sea is rough from its roar."

"We will go to the cliff and have a look."

Then up the ladder they went, the young wrecker leading, until they at last stood upon the cliff just above the false beacon.

"Ha! where is the craft, Leo?" cried the old wrecker.

"No wreck and no wreckage in sight, father, that is certain," answered Leo, casting his eyes at the sea and upon the different reefs and islands."

"What can it mean, boy?"

"She must have gone down, father."

"Her masts would certainly show."

"True, and they are not visible."

"The girl must know something to aid us, for she reported when she came in last night that the craft had struck."

"I will call her, father," and placing his fingers to his lips he gave several long, piercing calls.

A moment after there came a similar response from the little abiding-place in the interior rock, and before long the pretty face of Lita appeared over the edge of the cliff, as she came up the rope ladder.

"Girl, where is that craft you saw strike last night?" called out Wambold.

"Scattered along the shore doubtless, father, with her crew," was the response.

"Show me a piece of her hull, or a dead body."

"Nothing is certainly visible, father, to denote a wreck," answered Lita, after looking down along the basin shores, and then casting her eyes seaward.

"Not a spar or piece of timber, so where is she?"

"Ask the waves and winds, father, for I know not," was the response.

"You saw her strike?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"There on the Pitfall Reef, it seemed."

"Missing it, she would have been driven into the cove through the gap in the reef, and shivered to atoms against this rocky island?"

"Yes."

"Had she done so, some timber would have been visible to us?"

"So it seems, father."

"Well, solve the mystery, girl."

"I cannot, father, unless—" and she paused.

"Unless what, Lita?"

"Unless she was a spook craft, such as I have read about."

"Bah! you are always reading trash; but you should know that there are no such things."

"There are ghosts of people, after they are dead, so why not of vessels?" queried the girl,

and the man shuddered, for, in spite of his being a wrecker, and aiding in alarming superstitious seamen by his Death's Head Beacon, he was not wholly free from dread of the supernatural, so he said:

"Well, only a phantom craft could run in here and escape, as that vessel has done."

"Describe her, girl."

"A small schooner that looked like the coasters I have sometimes seen."

"You did not mistake her for the Phantom Pirate?"

"Oh, no, father, for I saw the Phantom Pirate too."

"Near the little craft?"

"Yes, heading as usual to cross her course."

"You are sure the little vessel did not follow in the wake of the Phantom?"

"No, father, the Phantom Pirate disappeared when near the small schooner, which came on toward the rock."

"And you last saw her almost upon the Pitfall Reef?"

"Yes, father, and supposed she had struck there; but now I remember I heard no cries, no crash, though the storm was roaring fearfully; but I have often heard the cries of the poor wretches in as terrible a storm."

"Yes, and should have heard her strike, and the cries of the crew last night."

"There is something strange in this, Leo."

"Yes, father, I don't like it," was the reply, and, after trying once more, unavailingly, to find more trace of the little vessel, the three descended to the cabin to breakfast, the woman having in the mean time prepared the repast.

CHAPTER XXII.

LURED TO DEATH.

SEVERAL weeks passed away, after the storm, which so nearly wrecked the little coasting schooner upon the Death Rock, and which would have done so, but for the nerve and skill of the masked woman who stood at her helm.

Night is again coming on, and, as on that eventful eve, the sun has set behind piled-up masses of black clouds, and a storm is sweeping up with the velocity with which those Southern tornadoes always come and go.

Out over the still quiet waters, for a light wind only is blowing, a brig is gliding along, her masts and spars stripped to meet the coming blow, and upon her decks anxious hearts, for all well know their danger, and her captain feels that he should never have attempted to run those dangerous channels so late in the day, but have waited to take a start at dawn and under a brisk breeze to drive him quickly through before the night should fall.

Standing upon the cliff side, by her Death Beacon, was Lita, the Girl Wrecker.

She had trimmed and burnished up her false lights, and was gazing out over the waters, her eyes resting sadly upon the brig.

"Ah me! why will those foolhardy sailors venture around such dangers with night coming on?" she muttered.

"Another gallant craft to be wrecked this night, and all on board to perish."

"But I wonder if she will go down, or escape like that little vessel some weeks ago, for father says she escaped, and yet I cannot believe it."

"I don't believe that he thinks so either, for I told him how I saw her last night upon the reef, and she could not escape unless she was a ghost craft, and I know it must have been, for we found no piece of wreckage and no body came ashore."

"It puzzles father and mother, I know, and Leo, too, and if yonder brig should run in and not be wrecked, I believe they would fly from this island, believing it to be haunted, and I wish they would."

"See, the brig stands for the Southern Pass; but before she reaches it the storm will strike her, and she will be driven this way to death!"

Thus mused the beautiful young wrecker, as—innocent of the very great crime she was committing, having been taught that it was no wrong, though her conscience rebelled at the work—she again looked to her lamps and took her stand by the balyards to raise the canvas covering when the proper time came.

Whether she had been seen in moving by some one on the deck of the brig she could not tell, but almost instantly she saw a commotion on board, and then came the boom of a gun.

"They want a pilot; but many others have sent forth that pleading cry before for help in these waters and received no aid, while those who could have saved them have watched them pass this rock and laughed to see them die."

"I wish I could help them; but if I did, those people would kill me," and she motioned over toward the cabins in the interior of the rock island as she spoke.

Again and again the brig fired, while the young girl saw them eagerly watching the Death Rock with their glasses.

Then darkness shut the craft from her view, and soon after the tornado came rushing over the waters with relentless fury.

The girl heard the roar of the tempest, beheld the wall of foam it drove before it, saw the lights of the brig suddenly disappear, then re-

appear, driving along with fearful rapidity, and then out upon the waters appeared the Phantom Pirate, sailing along as though heedless of the storm and crossing the bows of the unfortunate vessel that was now rushing toward the Death Rock.

Knowing that her time for action had come, she mechanically raised the canvas cover, and the false beacon flashed its weird eyes out over the tornado-swept sea.

It was no friendly light, guiding the appalled mariner to a safe haven, no friendly beacon showing him how to steer to avoid dangerous reefs, but a vivid, fiendish, ghastly glare that sent horror to the heart, and seemed to draw the helmsman with an unholy magnetism to hold his vessel's bow directly for its baleful gleam.

A few moments the lights on the brig dawned amid the wild waters, then loud cries were heard, the vessel was endeavoring to go about, her crew having sighted their danger, and, unable to do so in that fearful blow, next came a terrific crash, wailing cries, and then only the sound of the howling winds, and roaring of the mad waters.

At the proper moment the Girl Wrecker had lowered her canvas covering, and then putting out her lights, had ascended to the cliff, the wind causing her to sway wildly on her rope ladder.

Reaching the summit she beheld there, lying flat upon the rocks, to prevent being blown off, Wambold, the wrecker, who said hoarsely:

"Well, girl, was that a ghost craft too?"

"No, father, she struck on the Pitfall Reef and went to pieces."

"Good! and the morrow will bring us rich picking—but—Good God! see there!"

The man uttered the last words loudly, and in startled tones, while he pointed out over the wind-lashed waters to an object that had just then caught his gaze.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WEIRD CRAFT.

STRUCK by the excited manner of the wrecker, Lita turned quickly, as she was moving away to go to her cabin, and her eyes fell upon the object which seemed to have almost unnerved the man whom she called father.

Against the fierce winds she could not stand, and she at once followed the example of the wrecker and threw herself her full length upon the rocks.

Then it was her eyes rested upon that on which the gaze of Wambold was riveted, and she too seemed deeply moved by the sight she beheld.

A mile off the Death Rock, bounding over the waves as lightly as a life-boat, and carrying sail enough to run under a vessel twice her size, was a small schooner.

She was white as snow, masts, spars and rigging, and about her decks were visible several skeleton forms, while at the helm stood what appeared to be a female form robed in deep black.

About the craft, from truck to deck, hung a mysterious light, a glare that lighted her up so that every outline and object were distinctly visible, and yet they appeared as though seen through a mist.

Straight for the Death Rock the weird craft was wading, and in hushed tones the wrecker asked:

"Girl, what is it?"

"It looks like the ghost of the little vessel that went down on the Pitfall Reef some weeks ago," answered Lita.

"It does certainly look like the ghost of a craft."

"Can it be a second phantom vessel in these waters?"

"I know not, father," was the response.

"You certainly see what I see, girl!" and the wrecker rubbed his eyes, as though believing the craft might vanish.

"I do, father, if you see a vessel, schooner-rigged, some thirty tons burden, painted white, with a skeleton crew, a woman in black at the helm, and carrying full mainsail, foresail and jib in a blow that I would not believe she could stand up under, with mainsail and jib close-reefed?"

"Such is what I see, girl."

"But go and light your beacon, to see how that will affect the craft, while I call your mother and Leo."

The maiden crept to the edge of the cliff and went down to the lamp, while Wambold hastily started to summon his wife and son.

As the three reached the cliff, and lay down upon its summit, they beheld the Death Beacon's glare flung out over the wild waters.

They also beheld the weird craft still flying over the rough waves, and it was evident that she had changed her course since the wrecker had been absent.

Now, as the false beacon gleamed forth, the mysterious vessel put about, and headed directly for it.

"Ho, girl!" called out the wrecker over the edge of the cliff.

"Yes, father," came up the answer."

"Keep the beacon visible, and try and lure that craft to destruction."

"It is a ghost craft, father," was the answer.

"We shall soon know whether she can be destroyed, or is indeed the phantom of some wrecked craft."

"She comes on bravely," said Wambold.

"Yes, and fearlessly; that woman at the helm seems to have no fear of consequences," remarked Leo.

"Is it a woman?" asked the wrecker's wife in a whisper.

"That I know not; what say you, boy?" answered the wrecker, and then he added:

"Look close, for your eyes are younger than mine."

"I judge it to be a woman on account of her long robe, father."

"And so do I: but Lita has a glass with her, so hail and ask her what she can make of her."

"Ho, Lita!"

"Well, Leo."

"What is it at the helm of yonder craft?"

"A woman."

"Are you sure?"

"I have my glass on her, and the form is that of a woman, though she possesses the strength of a man or—"

"Or what?"

"A ghost."

"Can you see her face?"

"I have tried to—there! I see it now, and—Great God! it is a skull!"

A moan came from the three people upon the cliff.

They alarmed others by their supposed supernatural acts, their Death's Head Beacon and in other ways, and now when brought face to face with the very powers they pretended to use, they were appalled to discover that which they could not account for.

The weird craft was before them, white and ghostly; a black feminine form was at her helm, with a skull face, and about all pervaded a glare that came from the wreckers knew not where, so that they were indeed alarmed, and momentarily hid their eyes with their hands, as they lay full length upon the rock, their faces looking over the edge of the cliff, so that they could peer down to where Lita crouched for shelter at one side of the huge white skull-lantern.

Upon again raising their faces they beheld the weird craft almost under the shadow of the Death Rock, and watching her, until she was within a few lengths of the Pitfall Reef, the wrecker called out:

"Out with the beacon, girl, and if she works her way out of that danger, I will indeed believe that it is the ghost of a vessel."

Almost instantly the Skull Beacon became dark, and the rattling of the blocks showed that the girl was hauling the canvas covering up before it.

This done she turned to look at the strange craft, almost beneath her feet, when a cry from the cliff caused her to glance down into the dark depths below her.

"Great God! she has passed through the cut in the reef," cried Wambold, the wrecker.

It was true, as Lita saw, for the vessel had not been wrecked, but on the contrary, had passed through the narrow gap in the reef, and was then heading directly for the opening in the rocky wall of the island.

Quickly Lita ascended to the cliff, and joining her now appalled companions, they hastened to where they could look down into the ravine.

As they reached a point of observation, they saw the weird craft shoot into the basin, go about, as though on a pivot, then came two splashes, as dark objects were thrown overboard, and the little vessel again glided from sight into the pass between the walls of rock.

Rushing back to the cliff once more the four denizens of the island saw the weird craft glide out from the shadow, pass out through the reef, run the gantlet of rocks beyond, and disappear, a mile away, as though it had suddenly sunk forever beneath the waves.

"God have mercy upon us!" groaned Wambold, as he led the way to the cabins, the others following him in silence, wholly awed by what they had seen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WARNING TO THE WRECKERS.

THERE were three of the wreckers of Death Rock Island, who passed an uneasy night, after the sight they had seen of what they could not but believe, in their superstition, to be the phantom of a vessel wrecked by their acts.

Those three were Wambold, his wife and son.

As for Lita, she sinned in obeying the commands of those who were all she had to love, without being fully conscious of her wrongdoing, and the compunctions of conscience she felt at her acts, were simply caused by the natural goodness she possessed and her tenderness of heart.

Though herself managing the Death's Head Lantern, which sent a thrill of horror and dismay to all who beheld it, she did not know what harm it did from ever having been told

so, and she had been taught by Wambold and his wife, yes, and by Leo too, that all people in ships were their foes, who would destroy them if they could, and consequently should be slain before they could kill them.

With an easy conscience therefore, though a great desire to know more of the weird craft she had seen, and which had struck such terror to the hearts of her companions, Lita calmly sought her little cabin and retired to rest and to sleep, leaving the wrecker, his wife and son in the larger but discussing the strange circumstance.

"It cannot be the work of the Phantom Pirate crew," said the woman, and in a tone very suggestive of the idea that she wished it was.

"No, the Phantom Pirate never could run into our harbor as did that craft, as you should know, Mabel, and besides the schooner was one-third the size of the Phantom."

"True; but I had hoped it was the Phantom," answered the woman in a dejected tone.

"And so I wish it had been; but where we can account for the one, for the other there is but one way to look at it."

"And that way, father?" queried the young wrecker, Leo.

"That it is, as Lita says, a ghost craft."

"Heaven forbid," almost groaned the woman.

"Yes, so say I, wife; but it is a mystery which neither of us can solve, and I confess I have no desire to go to bed and sleep upon the remembrance of it."

"Nor I, father," said Leo, while the woman with a shudder remarked:

"I have no desire to sleep myself, so I will brew us a punch and we can sit up, at least until we get sleepy."

"Do so, wife, and we'll see if the morrow does not drive the blues from us, and mayhap that brig, which lies wrecked on the shelf, will bring us treasure enough to compensate for our fright about that accursed craft."

"I think the brig was richly laden, father, for she was an American."

"Ah! did you see her flag, boy?"

"No, but her rig was American, and those Yankees generally send well freighted craft into the Southern waters."

"You are right, Leo, and a few more craft will enable us to leave this desolate spot and live on our riches in the good land of the Yankees."

"You said the same five years ago, father, and you certainly have had the picking of a score of ships since then," dejectedly responded the young man.

"Yes, but I will soon have enough to bring me the sum I wish, and we can once more raise our heads as gentle people, who have the gold to support their good blood, for we come of good stock, boy, and at one time the Wambolds could hold up their heads with any in the land; but I'll not talk of the past, but say that soon we will leave this drear place, seek a home in the United States of America, and there become honored among people."

"Oh! that will be a joyous time, wife," and the wrecker rubbed his hands in glee, at the anticipation of what his ill-gotten, blood-stained gold would bring him in the future.

"Yes, it will be a joyous time, Alfred, if it ever comes; but you seem to love this old rock, and fear to leave it," responded the woman, placing three bowls of punch on the table before them.

"I love it for what it has brought us, wife, and when I have money enough, we will go."

"We are very rich, now, Alfred; or at least have booty enough to bring us riches."

"Yes, but not enough for our needs, for we must live like princes, and a few more weeks will get us all we need."

"This is a good punch, Mabel; just such an one as I have often drank in the old hall in dear old England—ah me! I must not recall the past."

"No, it were better not, far better not, for the past is horrid, the present all we have, and the future our only hope to repay us for what we have suffered," said the woman, sadly.

"And what have you suffered, mother?" asked Leo, who had been quietly sipping his punch.

"Sh! Leo, my son, you must not ask questions, for you will get no answers," said the man.

"Still let me ask one question then, of Lita, if you will not tell me of your past."

"Well, what would you know of the girl, my son?"

"She is not my own sister?"

"You know that much, as she does also."

"How came she with you?"

"While you were absent, years ago, on a run to Havana, we found her, as I told you, on a wreck that drove on the reef."

"I know you said so; but I always felt that you did not tell me everything."

"What else is there to tell, boy?"

"That is what I wish to know, for I discovered that there had been no vessel wrecked here during my absence, and yet I found the little girl here, and very sick, too, upon my return."

"She does not remember how she came, or in fact anything of her past, for I have asked

her, although she was nine years of age when she came."

"She had been ill and delirious a long time, boy," said his father.

"Yes, and it is strange that she should have been saved alone of all the crew."

"Oh, there were others, but they lost their lives in attempting to reach the shore, for you know I never allow any one to put foot here, boy."

"Yes, father; but knowing, as I do, that no vessel was wrecked while I was absent, I feel that you are hiding something from me about the girl."

"Oh, no, Leo, there is nothing to hide, other than we believe her to be an heiress to great wealth, who had been kidnapped and taken on the vessel by those who hoped for a large ransom, and we wish her to become your wife, so that when we find her kindred, you can lay claim to her inheritance."

"I am willing to marry her, Heaven knows; but she says she does not know what love means and—"

"Well, don't urge her now; wait until we leave this island, and then all will come out well, my son."

"Another of those excellent punches, wife," and the wrecker turned the subject of conversation into other channels, and the three talked on until the punch had the effect of causing them to drop asleep in their chairs.

It was after sunrise some time when Lita opened the door and looked in.

She looked as fresh as a morning rose, and something like a sneer curled her red lip as she beheld the trio.

"Come, are we to have no breakfast, mother? and besides, I have found something on the beach for you to see," she cried.

The three started to their feet, rubbed their eyes, looked ashamed, under the glare of day, of their superstitious fears of the night before, and the man said in ill-humored tones:

"What is it, girl?"

"You remember that the ghost craft threw something overboard when she ran into the basin last night?"

"Yes, they threw two objects into the water, it seemed," answered Leo.

"Well, the storm has cleared away, the morning is bright, and I have already been on the beach, and I found what had been thrown overboard."

"Ha! And the wrecked brig?" suddenly cried the man, seizing the silver pitcher and draining the remainder of the punch he observed in it.

"The brig is safe on the rocks, but the sea is too wild yet to go out."

"Any of her crew visible?"

"I saw three men on her deck."

"Well, we must look to them, and at once, so come, Leo, while your mother gets us something to eat," and the wrecker reached up to a bracket and took therefrom a rifle.

"But I have not told you what I found on the beach," continued the girl.

"Ha! a treasure-box."

"Two boxes, but they are empty."

"Come all and see them."

Impressed by her manner they followed her to the beach of the basin, and beheld two dark objects lying there side by side.

As they approached they glanced at each other in surprise, for they saw that they were coffins.

They were empty; their weight showed this, and upon the lid of each was a silver plate.

Bending over, the wrecker read aloud:

"Alfred Wambold."

"Good God! my name upon a coffin," and he staggered back, his hands covering his face, while his wife uttered a cry, as upon the other coffin she read her name upon the silver plate:

"Mabel Wambold."

"Here is a piece of paper on each," cried Lita; and upon the end of each coffin was a card, where was written, in a bold hand:

"A warning from the phantom craft, whose crew were lured to death by the Skull Beacon."

CHAPTER XXV.

BONO AND THE PIRATE.

LET me now return to the Sea Monster, whom we left on the way to New Orleans, where it was his intention to carry out the orders of the supposed padre, regarding the woman whom men called a witch, and upon whose head a price had been set.

It was a great disappointment to the pirate chief to have the yacht escape him, as it had so cleverly done, and to be worsted by a vessel one-fourth the size of his own, and he mentally swore that some day he would have his revenge upon the plucky boy commander of the little craft.

Of course he could not venture into New Orleans with his schooner, so well known there, for he had cut her out from that port to turn her into a pirate, the vessel having before been in the Government service, so he looked about for a craft to seize in which he could run up to the city.

"Why do you not disguise your craft, Captain English?" asked the youth, Bono, who stood

upon the quarter-deck with the Sea Monster one evening, as the schooner came in sight of the land.

"That trick has been done so frequently, young sir, that I might try it once too often."

"No, I will catch some coaster, and then hunt a lagoon on the coast to hide my schooner in until my return."

"And I can accompany you, sir?"

"Oh, yes, for I suppose you wish to make your report to the money-lender."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall perhaps not see him while there, for I have some business of importance to attend to; but, if I cannot accomplish it alone, I may have to call upon him for his aid, though for all he does for me he needs must have a fortune in payment."

The boy's heart beat more freely, for he feared it was the intention of the pirate chief to at once seek out the money-lender, and of course he would learn the story of how he had mysteriously disappeared.

Bono was anxious to prevent this, and also desirous of getting his men off the schooner in safety, while he also had a desire to learn what business the Sea Monster had in New Orleans.

To therefore keep the pirate from making the discovery regarding the supposed death of the money-lender, if possible to do so, he said:

"The Don is grasping, senor, and more, he wants an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, according to Scripture, so I would not be surprised if he wanted you to pay him for the loss of the brig and her cargo."

"I would see him in Satan's clutches first," angrily answered the Sea Monster.

"Unfortunately," cunningly urged Bono, "the Don has the advantage of you."

"In what way, boy?"

"He knows you as you are, and could have you seized and—"

"By heaven! but he should suffer, too."

"Ah, senor, let me tell you that Don Rudolpho would not be harmed by the officers of the law, for they are all indebted to him, and more, it would be said your charges against him were made through revenge."

"By the gods! but you have a wise head, boy."

"I like you, Captain English, and I do not care to see you entrapped, so my advice would be for you to keep very quiet while in the city, and, as soon as you can transact your business, to leave."

"I'll do it; but I am something of a stranger there, and would have you tell me who I can go to as one who would serve me well?"

"What is the work to be done, senor?"

"Have you a mind of earning an honest *peso* by doing it yourself?"

"I have done much for the Don, my master, senor."

"I believe you, and I feel that you can be trusted, or you would not have warned me, so I'll give you a handsome sum to aid me."

"It's a bargain, captain."

"You know the city well?"

"Perfectly, senor."

"And could find any one hidden there?"

"I think so, without doubt."

"Well, Bono, I seek a woman and her son."

"Who are they?"

"The one is a woman who goes robed in deep black, wearing a deep veil to conceal her face, for it is greatly disfigured."

"Deformed?"

"No, and yet it is tattooed in red and blue inks."

"This is strange."

"It was done when she was on the South Sea Islands, where she was wrecked with her husband and child years ago."

"The natives tattooed her, and she was a long time a prisoner; but she made her escape and is now in hiding in New Orleans."

"And her son also, you said?"

"Yes, he is with her."

"Also tattooed?"

"No—or at least his face is not, for he is a handsome fellow."

"I think I can find them."

"I do not doubt it, if they are in the city."

"And if I do?"

"You will inform me, for I shall stop at an inn where I can remain unknown, and we will concoct some plan to get them on board my vessel, when I will pay you well for your work."

"I will do it, senor."

"And will the Don give you the time?"

The youth hesitated, while thoughts flashed rapidly through his mind.

He was shrewd far beyond his years, for his wanderings had made a man of him by bitter experience.

Knowing as he did that the townspeople knew of the mysterious disappearance of the money-lender, and believing that he had left him to die in the vault, he feared that the Sea Monster might learn of the Don's death; and so, deciding to come out boldly and meet the danger half-way, he said:

"Oh, yes, captain, I can get the time, for just now my master is in hiding."

"In hiding?"

"Yes, senor."

"I thought you said he had no fear of the law."

"Nor has he; but he has a certain point to gain by being supposed to be dead for a few weeks, and he so left his home as to cast such a suspicion in the eyes of the community; but this is a secret I can tell only to you, sir."

"I will not betray it, my lad; but that master of yours is up to all kinds of tricks and devilry."

"Yes, senor, he is as cunning as a fox, and has the courage of a wolf; but I of course know where to find him, and as the shop is not open, it will give me ample time to serve you."

"That is fortunate, and according to your services you shall be paid."

"Thank you, senor," and casting his eye around the horizon, Bono's keen eyes fell upon a sail.

He was about to sing out his discovery in the usual way; but remembering the fate of the other negligent lookout, he quietly walked away and rapidly ascended the rigging.

"Man, where are your eyes that you do not see yonder sail on our quarter?"

"Wait until I descend to the deck and then sight her," said Bono, in a low whisper.

The lookout started, his eyes fell upon the sail, and he murmured:

"The Virgin bless you, senor."

The Sea Monster, as Bono left his side, had bent over the taffrail in deep meditation, and did not notice the youth's return, apparently.

But he started as there came from aloft the cry:

"Sail, ho!"

"Hail where is she, my man?"

"Off our starboard quarter, sir."

"Ah, yes, I see her, and your eyes need cleaning that you did not see her before."

"She is a coaster, and doubtless a plantation craft, and just what I need."

"Give chase, Senor Tabor, and we will soon have her for a prize," and at the order of the chief the schooner changed her course and started in pursuit of the stranger, which only then seemed to have sighted the dangerous enemy so near.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SAVED BY EAVESDROPPING.

THE vessel sighted from the deck of the pirate schooner, proved to be, as the Sea Monster had predicted, a coaster from a plantation.

It was soon overhauled, and on board a crew of negroes, with the overseer of the plantation as captain, and her cargo was produce for the New Orleans market.

Running close inshore those on board had not suspected danger, and the pirate was about upon them before they sighted him.

To run from so fleet a craft as was the schooner they soon saw was useless, and the overseer captain quickly surrendered.

With his blacks the overseer was taken on board the schooner as prisoners, while, selecting the negroes from among his own crew, the Sea Monster placed them on the coaster, and put a lieutenant in charge.

"Now, Senor Bono, we will take passage in this craft, while you, Tabor, run the schooner to the rendezvous up the coast and await my coming," said the Sea Monster, as he sprang on the deck of his prize.

"Come, lads," called out Bono to the men who had been in the boat with him.

"No, let your men remain on the schooner until your return," said the chief.

"My return, senor?"

"Yes, for you will have to bring back those whom you are to seek for me, and besides, I have an offer to make you soon, which I think you will accept."

Bono dared not rebel, so he merely said a few words in a low tone to one of his men, and hastily followed the Sea Monster on board the coaster, which at once set sail for the Balize, while the schooner stood off along the coast.

After a fair run the little craft dropped anchor opposite the city, and Bono at once went on shore, and securing a vehicle returned for the Sea Monster, who was driven to the inn which he made his quarters when in New Orleans.

Having seen the chief secreted, Bono sought another tavern for himself and as it was after midnight retired, leaving word to be called at an early hour.

He was up with the sun, and having seen the woman in black at the money-lender's, and then discovered where she was residing, although he did not make this fact known to the Sea Monster, he at once went to the inn.

But inquiry there proved that the Witch and her son had departed some time before, and gone no one knew whither.

But Bono was not one to be dismayed, and he set to work to trace the fugitives, and it did not take him long to ascertain that the strange couple had left the city; but more he could not find out.

It was night when he again returned to the inn where the Sea Monster was in hiding, and going up to his room he saw a man glide in the door before him.

Bono was suspicious, and more, he was anxious to know just what was going on, so he crept to the door and placed his ear on a level with the keyhole.

What he heard was of great value to him, and he listened with the deepest interest and attention.

"By the cross! Mendon, but I nearly sent a bullet through your heart, for coming in as you did unannounced," he heard the Sea Monster say to the intruder.

"Pardon, cap'n, but I recognized you last night as you took the vehicle on the levee, and tried to catch you, but could not, so have been all day trying to find you."

"And how did you find me?"

"I went to every tavern in town and made inquiries."

"And the host told you I was here?"

"Oh no, cap'n; he told me you was not; but I swooped around and found a carriage had put down two people here last night, and one was a giant in size so I just took a room on this floor and waited until your supper was sent up, and then I found out just where you was and here I am."

"Well, what do you want, Mendon?"

"I'm in ill-luck, cap'n, and though I left you, as I told you, to be honest again, I missed stays and so I'm in for another cruise for yellow dust."

"Well, I'll give you a berth, for you are a good man aboard ship, Mendon, so remain here until I sail."

"Thank you, cap'n; but do you sail soon?"

"Yes, in a day or so."

"I'm glad, for I was anxious for a berth, and had the money-lender been alive, I'd have known just where to go and get one."

"You mean Don Rudolpho?"

"Yes, senor."

"Is he dead?" asked the pirate, remembering what Bono had told him.

"Yes, cap'n; and murdered for his gold, too."

"What?"

"You see he kept a mighty sight of gold and gems in his den, and a youth he had as private clerk killed him and got away with the riches."

"What?" and the Sea Monster was upon his feet.

"They say that a youth, Bono by name, killed the Don, threw his body in the river at night, and then set sail in a craft with his gold, gems and other riches."

"By Heaven! but this is a strange story, and it tallies with the truth, for I remember the boy had plenty of money; but then I supposed the Don had given it to him for expenses."

"Can he be playing me some game?" and the pirate walked to and fro, talking aloud, but rather to himself than to his visitor.

"I guess the story's straight, cap'n, for folks say the boy was a cunning one and knew what he was about."

"Mendon, do you know I captured that boy at sea?"

"No, sir."

"Yes, I chased his vessel; it was set on fire and blown up, and I picked up a boat with the boy and five men in it."

"He told me it was the Don's brig, and he came here with me, and is now off executing a mission of importance for me."

"He'll be recognized and bagged, cap'n."

"Not he, for he assumed a disguise before reaching the city."

"Oh, he's a cunning one!"

"He is, indeed; but I will not give him a chance to betray me, for when he returns here I will seize him, as he may be even now selling me out."

"Maybe, cap'n."

"Well, Mendon, you go out and see if you can glean any news, for I dare not be seen on the streets even by night."

"If the boy comes I will keep him here, and when you return we will knife him, if it appears that he intends to give me trouble."

"Now go and see if there is anything threatening brewing."

"Yes, cap'n; and I can find out if anybody can."

Away darted Bono before the door opened, and the sailor passed out, little dreaming all that had been said had been overheard.

Shortly after the disappearance of the man, a servant took a note to the room of the Sea Monster.

Breaking the seal, he read:

"Be not disturbed at my absence, for I find that I am suspected of being the murderer of the Don and running off with his riches."

"Of course I have to be most careful, until such a time as the Don chooses to reappear and prove my innocence."

"I have already found a trace of those you bade me seek, and hope to give you full information regarding them before long; but be patient, should it be a day or two before I see you."

"I told the Don who was my captor, and he says he will make you pay for it when next you visit the city."

There was no address and no signature to this letter, and the Sea Monster read it over twice.

Then his face wore a puzzled look, and after awhile he muttered:

"I have wronged the boy, as has the public, for his letter tells me frankly that he finds he is suspected of murdering the Don."

"And more, the boy says the Don will make me pay for capturing his brig and I do not doubt it."

"And the youth has gotten on the track of those I seek, and I am glad, for outside of the money consideration for their capture, I wish my own revenge against the old Witch and her son, while I also desire to know more of this padre, or whatever he is."

"Well, I'll be patient, and I'll take the youth with me as an officer, for he will be useful."

So mused the Sea Monster, the letter of Bono having allayed his suspicions.

Having written the letter, after leaving the inn, Bono, well knowing how quickly the pirate would put an end to his life, wended his way rapidly down the street, as though bent upon some errand of importance.

As he walked along he muttered:

"He intended to knife me, did he?"

"Well, we shall see, we shall see, for though I will not deliver him over to the authorities, I will at least leave him to look out for himself, while I take the means thus offered me of gaining my own ends."

"I certainly am in luck," and with this remark, Bono entered a low drinking saloon not far from the levee.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BONO'S PLOT.

THE place which Bono entered was a sailor's tavern, with a drinking saloon, or tap room in the front.

It was a rickety old house, which had once done duty as a respectable inn, but had, as the city enlarged, been left to the fate of becoming the resort of the worst characters, and its frequenters were kept constantly under the eyes of the officers of the law.

Bono had disguised himself by putting on the garb of a sailor, and hiding his face beneath a very natural looking beard.

With the free and easy swagger of a mariner he entered the tap room and went into a small alcove, of which there were some dozen ranged upon one side.

Calling to a pretty bar-maid he called for a cigar and bottle of light wine, and when she brought it asked in a low tone:

"Is the Senor Miguel in?"

"Yes, senor."

"Say to him that a friend would like to see him."

"Here, senor?"

"No, in his private room."

"I will tell him, senor," and the maid disappeared; but she soon returned with the response:

"The Senor Miguel begs you to send your name, senor."

Bono frowned, but after a moment's hesitation drew out a bank note for a hundred dollars and said:

"Tell him that this is my card."

The girl looked surprised, but carried the bank-note with her, and soon returned with word for Bono to follow her.

The disguised youth, who had merely sipped the wine which he had ordered, arose and followed her, passing through a door leading to the rear of the building.

Ascending a narrow stairway, the girl opened a stout oaken door and ushered Bono into a large room, after which she retired.

The room was comfortably furnished, in fact, it was supplied with luxuries which no one would have deemed could be found within, judging from the appearance of the old building without.

In an easy-chair sat a wiry-formed, stern-faced little man, his dark skin and hair showing his Spanish blood.

He merely raised his eyes as Bono entered and motioned to a seat, which was so placed as to keep the occupant on the opposite side of the table before which the Spaniard sat.

"I am the Senor Miguel, and I would know your name, and the nature of your business with me," said the man in a suspicious tone, his hands evidently grasping a weapon which the table concealed from view.

"It matters not what my name is, for the bank-note is introduction enough, and my business is of a nature that will pay well," answered Bono, quietly.

"That is what I live to earn—gold."

"So I know, Senor Miguel, and hence my visit to you."

"You know me, it seems."

"I do."

"And yet I can not recall your face."

"Nor do I care to have you, though we have met before; but now to business."

"What do you wish done?"

"I need a crew of good men."

"Ah! what for?"

"To go to sea, of course."

"In what capacity?"

"As seamen."

"I know that; but in what service?"

"One that will be full of danger and pay well."

"In fact, you intend to raise a black flag."

"In fact I intend to do no such thing; but on the contrary I shall haul one down."

"You speak in enigmas."

"Because it is none of your business, senor, what flag I sail under, or what my sea work shall be."

"You are blunt, to say the least of it."

"I am frank, and I came to you to supply me with a crew of men that I could depend upon."

"How many?"

"Half a hundred will do."

"When do you want them?"

"For to-morrow night."

"They will demand a bounty."

"How much?"

"Ten peso to each man."

"They shall have it."

"And my price will be ten peso to the man."

"You shall have it."

"In advance?"

"Yes, now," and Bono took out a roll of bank-notes, and counting the amount for bounty for the seamen and pay for the Spaniard, handed the sum to him.

"This is dry work, senor, suppose we have a bottle of wine," said the Spaniard, his eyes glistening at sight of the money displayed by the youth.

"Oh, no, thank you, senor, I touch wine very lightly, and I have a remembrance that your hospitality sometimes kills, as was the case with a rich young man who sought your advice some time ago."

The Spaniard turned livid, and gasped:

"What do you mean, senor?"

"Only that a young man came to you once with some gems to get rid of, and was foolish enough to drink wine with you."

"Somehow you threw his body in the river by night, and kept the gems; but you honestly returned them, when Don Rudolpho, who had sent the poor fellow to you, wrote and asked for them," and Bono smiled.

"Who are you?" and the Spaniard's eyes shone with a deadly light.

"One who was not fool enough to come here alone, senor, for comrades await my coming and know where I am, so do not have any designs upon me."

"When do you wish your crew?" bluntly asked the Spaniard, as though anxious to turn the conversation from himself.

"To-morrow night at ten."

"Where?"

"Let them be at the grove of willows below here."

"They will be ready."

"Send me good men, for I shall hold you responsible for their behavior."

"They will be the best I can secure on so short a notice, senor."

Bono made no reply, but bowed and left the room, the Spaniard still keeping his seat at the table.

Leaving the tavern the youth wended his way to the river, and was soon on board the little coaster which had brought the Sea Monster and himself to the city.

"Senor Rodriguez, I expect we will have to leave to-morrow night, and the captain sent me down to tell you to be in readiness, and at dark to drop down opposite the willow grove half a mile below here, and have the boats lowered to bring on board some men," said Bono to the officer left in charge of the coaster.

"Ah! I half-suspected the captain had come to the city after more men, and we certainly need them, for piracy with a large crew is bad enough, but with a small one it is madness," said Rodriguez.

"Well, it will be large enough this time, for the captain will follow with another craft and two-score more b-sides those I bring on board to-morrow night," and Bono, his mind busy with his deep plot, returned to the shore and again sought the inn where he had engaged lodging.

As he entered the door a man, who had evidently been watching him, turned and marched briskly away, and kept up his brisk pace until he had reached the tavern where the Sea Monster was in hiding.

"Well!" said the pirate chief, as the seaman entered his room.

"I found him, senor, after I knew the disguise he had on, and he entered the inn where he puts up."

"Then he is all right, I guess, and has some good reason doubtless for not coming here."

"May be, cap'n."

"I feel that I wronged him, and you also, after I got his note; but I wanted to feel sure, and so sent you to look him up."

"Now, go to the same inn where he is, and put up, and keep your eye on him, for, if he is up to any trick, I wish to know it."

"Here is gold for you."

The seaman took the money and departed, and the next day he "shadowed" Bono pretty thoroughly, yet discovered nothing to arouse his suspicions until an hour after dark, when he tracked him to the river.

What he found out there caused him to run in great haste to the inn, and mounting into the room of the Sea Monster, he cried:

"Great Heaven, cap'n, the cunning fox set sail ten minutes ago on board the craft you came here in, and he had three-score of men with him, which he took off in boats from the shore."

"By the cross! he has gone down to seize my schooner."

"Blind man! fool! idiot! traitor! it was to watch him that I sent you, and he has either paid you to keep silent or outwitted you shamefully."

"Take that!"

The man attempted to spring backward out of harm's way; but he was too late, for the iron barrel of the pistol held in the Sea Monster's hand descended upon his head with crushing force, and he dropped dead at the feet of his murderer.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PADRE UNMASKED.

THERE was, in the outskirts of the old town of San Augustine, at the time of which I write, a grand old Spanish homestead.

It was a villa, with a large court inside of its four walls, and flower gardens surrounded it upon two sides, a lawn on a third, and a grove of majestic trees on the fourth side.

Around the score of acres that comprised the estate was a strong wall, terminating at the water's edge upon one side, in what was a fort with half a dozen small guns mounted there.

Off this latter fort lay at anchor several pleasure craft, and upon the sandy beach were boats with cushioned seats and light oars, tempting one to a row upon the waters.

The villa was a massive structure, in fact a fort in its way, as regarded the strength of its walls, and upon its roof were mounted several guns of light caliber.

Large, with comfortable rooms luxuriantly furnished, and about it every indication of the wealth of its owner, it was a home to enjoy life in to one's heart's content.

Servants in white moved about the house and grounds, a negro guard was stationed upon the roof, and a lookout stood in the turret of the sea fort, but otherwise there was no display of military to indicate that it was a garrison.

The place was known as Fort Monte, after its builder, a wealthy Spaniard, who had come to San Augustine and spent a fortune in building a home, to die the day it was finished.

It was inherited by a young profligate, who quickly squandered his inheritance, and then sold the property to a stranger who had lately arrived in the town and whom no one seemed to know.

The stranger however paid cash for the estate, and moved in at night, which the superstitious said would bring him ill-fortune.

But the stranger soon became known as a man of vast riches, who spent his gold freely, and lived a life of luxury in the home he had purchased.

It was said that the new owner of Fort Monte was a bachelor, and yet there were those who asserted that they had caught sight of a beautiful lady rowing upon the waters of the little cove that put in opposite the villa.

The name of this new-comer was Rudolph Ramon, for so he called himself, and people said that he was a Mexican, though it was not known for certain what was his nationality.

Whatever or whoever he might be, people cared little, when he spent his gold as did Rudolph Ramon, and his antecedents were not inquired into too closely.

"The Senor," as he was called, was a man of fine appearance, elegance of manners, and a dark, handsome face, that had the appearance of a padre.

He dressed well, and seemed determined, with his elegant home, servants, pleasure-craft, horses, and high living, to get the most out of life that he could.

One afternoon the Senor Ramon was pacing to and fro among his flowers, when the lookout on the little fort turret gave signal that a vessel was coming up to an anchorage near, for, from some reason, the owner of Ramon villa had all craft arriving and departing reported to him.

At once he went to the fort and scanned the coming vessel.

"It is a New Orleans trader, senor," said the man who was serving duty as guard.

"So I see," and the senor took up a glass and turned it upon the vessel, which soon after came to an anchorage about a quarter of a mile from the fort.

A boat soon after put ashore, and, still watching it with his glass, the senor uttered an exclamation, but whether of alarm, surprise or joy the guard did not know.

When the boat at last touched the beach, near the town, and those in it had disembarked, the senor walked rapidly toward the villa.

"Gramont, there will be a man here to see me before long," he said to a servant on duty at the gate in the wall that surrounded the grounds.

"Yes, senor."

"When he arrives ring for a servant and bid

him escort him to my library and then leave him."

"Yes, senor."

With this Senor Rudolph Ramon walked away, and soon after entered the villa.

An hour or more passed, and, just as the sun was setting, a servant entered the room where Senor Ramon was seated and said

"A visitor to see the senor."

"His name."

"He gave none, senor; but said he was anxious to see you on an important matter."

"Where is he?"

"In the senor's private library, where Gramont bade me conduct him."

"Very well, I will see him," and a few moments after the visitor was confronted by his host, the latter being in the garb of a padre, and in the former no one who had once seen him could fail to recognize the giant seaman known as the Sea Monster.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PIRATE AND THE PADRE'S COMPACT.

THE Sea Monster, when he called at the elegant home of Senor Ramon, was dressed in the attire of a gentleman of that age.

His great size would have rendered him an object of attention in any crowd, and on this account it would be useless for him to attempt to disguise himself, unless he, in some way, changed his face with a beard, and then his giant form would naturally attract attention to him, and cause those who knew just such a man in the Sea Monster to suspect him of being that red-handed outlaw.

He rose as the padre entered and bowed low, at the same time devoutly crossing himself, while he said in his deep voice:

"We meet again, Senor Padre, as you see I have come to seek you here, as you directed."

"Yes, and I am glad to see you, Captain English, and trust you have carried out my instructions and thereby won your price," and the padre motioned to his visitor to resume his seat, while he took another near him.

"Senor Padre, knowing me as you do, you would not be surprised at my attempting to deceive you."

"In fact, I might say to you that I carried out your plans to the letter, and have now come for the balance of my blood-money."

"And have you not?"

"No, senor, I have not."

The Senor Ramon started, his face paling and flushing quickly, while he asked:

"Do you mean that you have not found the woman and her son?"

"I will tell you all, Senor Padre, that I have done."

"Be quick, please, for I confess I am desirous of knowing," and there was the indication in the man's manner that he was indeed anxious.

"Well, Senor Padre, I shall make a clean breast of it," and the Sea Monster went on to tell of his adventures with the brig, the yacht under the Planter Midshipman's command, and the picking up of the boat's crew.

Also he told of how he had trusted Bono.

"By Heaven! that boy!" cried the padre excitedly.

"Yes, senor, a youth whom I had seen at the office of the money-lender, Don Rudolpho, acting as a confidential clerk, and whom I consequently trusted."

"And where is he now?"

"He is at present on board my schooner."

"Then you have him safe?"

"No, senor, but he has my schooner safe."

"Pray do not speak in enigmas, Sir Pirate."

"Nor do I intend so to do, Senor Padre."

"But the truth is I trusted the boy, and he was, as I supposed, on the track of the woman and her son, when instead, he was very, very coolly laying his own plans to get possession of my vessel."

"I had met an old seaman, who had once sailed with me, but becoming conscience-haunted turned honest and left; but running through with his gold, he saw me and wished again to serve under the black flag."

"This man I put to watch the youth, and the result was, he soon brought me word that Bono had set sail with half a hundred men, in the very craft that I had run up to the city in."

"Of course I knew that he had gone to seize my vessel, and, wild with passion, I knifed the sailor, when, if I had not done so, he would have been useful to me."

"But I then had to pay a round sum to the tavern-keeper to hide his body and become my spy."

"He proved a good one, for he discovered that Bono was really the murderer of Don Rudolpho, the money-lender, and had fled with the fortune he robbed him of."

"Knowing this, I could not doubt the youth's having taken the opportunity offered him by my blindness in trusting him, of seizing my schooner; but why he did not put a rope around my neck I cannot understand, for he certainly had it in his power to do so, and I appreciate his forbearance."

"You have cause to; but this youth, Bono, is then said to have killed Don Rudolpho and robbed him?"

"Yes, Senor Padre."

"Well, what did you discover regarding the woman and her son?"

"The innkeeper found out for me that they had set sail some time before from the city, leaving in a small vessel, evidently a coaster."

"And he knew nothing more regarding them?"

"Nothing, Senor Padre."

"And what is it your intention to do now, senor, that you are stranded by this boy's act?"

"I shall hunt him down!" was the savage reply.

"But how?"

"I have a few thousands that I can use, and it will not take me very long to get a vessel and a crew."

"You are right, senor; for, a marked man on shore, you can but live on the sea, where, with a fleet craft, you can afford to be at war with the world."

"But how did you leave the city?"

"The innkeeper engaged me passage on the vessel I arrived here in, and keeping my berth for a few days as an invalid, I was not suspected by any one, excepting, I may say, one of the crew."

"Did he not betray you?"

"He intended to, but I slipped a round sum of gold into his hand the moment I saw him, and bade him keep quiet about me, and he did, for he once sailed with me, and I promised him an officer's berth with me again."

"You were fortunate not to be recognized; but when do you think you can get afloat again?"

"I cannot say, senor, as all my earnings were on my schooner, excepting the few thousands I have with me, and a man cannot work rapidly without plenty of gold."

"But I shall get afloat at the very earliest moment I can."

The padre arose and walked to and fro for a moment in silence, and then halting before the pirate, said:

"Senor, I have a proposition to make you."

"Well, Senor Padre."

"I wish to buy you."

"Buy me, Senor Padre?"

"Yes, I wish to have you sell yourself to me."

"I have heard of one's selling himself body and soul to Satan, and think his Satanic Highness has a lease on me; but I never heard of a man selling himself to one who represents the church," said the pirate, in a tone that denoted surprise and curiosity.

"Then you be the exception, for I shall pay a good price."

"Done, Senor Padre; when am I to take orders as a priest?"

"Bah! don't be blasphemous by such a thought as one like you becoming a priest; but let me tell you what I will do."

"I am all attention, Senor Padre."

"I will give you gold to buy the best vessel afloat, if you cannot cut one out, and to get a crew that will be worthy of you."

"You can fit her out thoroughly, and then set sail, destined to perform two duties."

"All that falls in your way, such as prizes, capture, and they shall belong to you; but your aim shall be to capture that boy, Bono, and to hunt down that woman, the Witch, and her son."

"Find these three persons and bring them to me, and the vessel I buy for you is your own, with all on board of it; while, for each one of the three I seek, I will pay you ten thousand dollars in gold on delivery into my hands."

"In communicating with me come by night, and I will arrange a series of signals by which I will know you; but never must you land in this town, or allow any one to know that you have dealings with me."

"I understand, senor, and gladly I accept your terms," and the eyes of the Sea Monster flashed with joy at the thought of so soon being afloat once more.

"Now, here is gold for you, and here is a code of private signals, by which you can always gain entrance to my place, if you come by the water-way."

"But tell me, did any one from the town see you come here?"

"No, senor; for I learned that this was the Senor Ramon's house from the captain of the vessel before I landed, as he was describing the place to his passengers, and speaking of the wealth of that gentleman."

"You are his father confessor, doubtless, senor?"

"Yes, I am the confessor of the Senor Ramon."

"But now you must depart, and do not, to any one, speak of your visit here, or mention the senor's name."

"You will find ample gold here; but if you need more come after it, but come by night, and by the way I tell you, and remember, you are my slave until you have hunted down those three, the Witch, her son, and the boy Bono."

"I shall remember, Senor Padre," and the Sea Monster took his leave.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PIRATE'S PLANS.

"SHE'S fleet as the wind, though small, and has three large pivot guns that are good at long

range, and they are sufficient, for my aim is to avoid cruisers and not fight."

"I think she is the very craft for me, and with her speed and fifty good men on board I can capture any prize I wish, and out-foot any armed craft sent after me."

"Yes, she will do, and by cutting her out, I can save the purchase-money given me by the padre."

So mused the Sea Monster, on his way back to the inn where he put up in San Augustine.

He was in luck, he considered, in having stepped into a position at once to give him a vessel once more, and he was determined that a very short while would pass, before he was again upon an armed deck with the black flag above him.

"I remember that we spoke the yacht, as we came in, and that boy captain of her said to our skipper that he would be in this harbor soon after our arrival."

"Why, with half his sail set he just walked across our bows and dropped us, without the slightest trouble, and we had a good sailer too."

"Yes, I shall just look about me for a crew, and if the faces of the men in this port do not belie them, it will not be hard to secure fifty good cut-throats for my purpose."

"Egad! the padre will see that I have begun work in earnest, when he knows I cut out the armed yacht right in the harbor, and came here alone and friendless."

"Now who is this padre? Somehow I feel that I have met him before that day at sea, and yet, for the life of me I cannot place when or where."

"Let me think! No, I cannot recall him; but he certainly has money, and plenty of it, and this rich Senor Ramon must be his backer."

"I should have liked to have met the senor."

"Perhaps I might have recognized him."

"He may be some retired prince, enjoying the luxury of his hard earnings, as I hope to some day."

"Well, that boy's running off with my schooner was a hard blow, for he has my gold with him in the secret locker of my cabin."

"But I shall get it back, if I capture the schooner, and my revenge too."

"As for the Witch and her son, I feel confident that she is up to her old tricks, wrecking vessels by false beacons, and I shall visit every island of the Indies but what I find her."

"She left New Orleans in a small craft, so cannot have gone far, so I have hopes of capturing all three of those I seek for the senor's revenge and my own."

"If I get the boy, and the Witch, I guess their riches, with what I have made in the mean time, will enable me to carry out my cherished plan of returning to England and—But I must not dwell upon that," and the Sea Monster said no more until he arrived at the inn, where the landlord told him a man was waiting to see him.

He slightly started at this, but catching sight of the visitor, and recognizing the sailor whom he had met on the packet-ship, and once had been a member of his crew, he spoke to him cordially, and invited him to his room.

The man followed him in silence.

He was a fine-looking fellow, evidently an American, and as evidently one who had been well-born, and been driven, by hard luck, or crime, to become an outlaw.

He had served as quartermaster on the packet in which the pirate had been a passenger, and remarked as he entered the latter's room at the inn:

"It was lucky, captain, my seeing you, for I was looking about for work; but here is your gold you gave me, and which I took, for I had no chance to tell you that I am not the man to play traitor to an old messmate, or to be bought off with money."

"By Neptune, Benedict, but you have good mettle in you, and I have work for you," assured the pirate.

"I am ready, captain."

"I am ashore now, but not for long, and I need your aid to help me get another craft."

"You, too, have been in ill luck, captain?"

"Yes, through the treachery of one I trusted," said the pirate, not seeming to remember that Bono had any claim to be sincere with him, and that he would have killed him, had he returned to him at the inn in New Orleans.

"My schooner was stolen from me."

"Stolen?"

"Yes, and by a boy; but I shall retake her and have my revenge."

"Then I start on a cruise in search of two others, whom I have pledged myself to find."

"I am with you, sir."

"The first thing is to get a vessel."

"We can cut out some craft, sir."

"I thought of taking the packet, until a better idea came upon me."

"She is hardly suitable, captain; and besides, her skipper and the crew were kind to me, and I would hate to see them suffer."

"Bah! you must get rid of all conscience and heart in our business, Benedict."

"I cannot wholly forget, captain, that I have a heart, or I should cease to remember how you risked your life to save me once, charging back

and rescuing me, when you found I was captured by the cruiser's men."

"I did it because you were a good man, Benedict, and I needed you."

"Otherwise I should have left you to swing."

"Well, sir, whatever the motive, I shall not forget it, for I would have swung within the hour, as they had the rope about my neck."

"But have you decided upon any plan?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind telling me it?"

"No, and shall do so."

"Do you remember the armed yacht that spoke the packet three days ago, and walked away from her so?"

"Yes, the Sea Owl, commanded by that daring young midgy, Brandt, whom the Government commissioned for gallant service and appointed to cruise in the Gulf in his yacht, and serve as a coast-guard?"

"That is the very craft, Benedict, and a more daring man than her young skipper, boy in years though he is, does not walk a quarter-deck."

"I know him, and he knows me; but it is my intention to renew the acquaintance, for, you may remember, he said he would soon follow the packet into this port?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I wish to at once get a crew here, have them in readiness, on board some craft we must buy, and watch our chance to seize the yacht."

"She is fleet as a bird, sir."

"And stanch as a church steeple in a gale of wind, while she is armed and equipped thoroughly."

"Well, captain, now to get the crew."

"I know nothing of this port, but suppose it can be done."

"Oh, yes, for gold buys ready hands and brave hearts."

"Well, Benedict, I do not wish to be known in the affair, for my size makes me conspicuous, and it is pretty well known in the Gulf ports that the Sea Monster is a giant in form, so I will quietly keep at anchor in the inn here, and let you work."

"Here is gold for you, and you know that I wish to get a cheap craft and then a crew."

"Have you left the packet?"

"No, sir, but shall go on board and do so, telling the captain I have a chance to get a trader to command."

"Then I shall look the harbor over for a vessel, and pick up men as I can."

"Do so, Benedict, and remember that you are to be my first officer."

"I thank you, captain, and I will do my duty by you."

With this the newly appointed pirate lieutenant left the room, bound upon his evil mission to again sail the seas beneath the flag of a buccaneer.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE WATER WOLVES' RED WORK.

To say that Wambold, the Water Wolf, his wife and son were uneasy, after the finding of the two coffins on the beach, would be to draw it mildly.

They were at first horrified at the sight of the ominous caskets, and looked upon them as ill-omened in the greatest degree.

Their superstition, blunted in a manner by their own trickery in exciting superstitious dread in seamen, was kindled anew with full force.

That the Ghoul Craft, as they called the mysterious vessel that had put into the harbor in the storm, avoiding all dangers and running out in safety, had left the coffins they did not doubt.

They had seen two dark objects thrown from her deck by the mysterious craft, and the coffins were certainly those objects.

The vessel they had lured to wreck had come bows on, and striking a sunken reef with great force, had run half out of water and remained there, not going to pieces—so the ill-omened caskets could not have come from on board her.

Some of her crew, then on deck at the time she struck, had been washed into the sea, and after being beaten to death against the rocks, had been driven into the basin and cast upon the beach.

Their bodies were searched, and then buried by the Water Wolves, Lita having been sent to the cliff to see how many persons yet remained upon the wrecked brig.

The young girl sought a hiding-place in the rocks, whence she could look down upon the brig and yet not be seen.

She beheld three persons only, one of them a sailor, to judge from his dress, and the other two evidently passengers.

The brig's masts had gone overboard when she struck, and her decks had been swept clean.

But she was well up upon the reef, and the sea having run down greatly, no longer cast its spray over her.

She was upon the Pitfall Reef, not two cables' length distant, and a stanch, fine-looking craft

to have her wooden bones upon the inhospitable shores of the island of the Water Wolves.

"Those people are scared," muttered Lita, referring to Wambold, his wife and daughter, as she sat in her rocky retreat gazing down upon the brig, but thinking of her companions.

"Well, I don't wonder at it, for I'd hate to find a coffin with my name on it."

"Ah! here comes father now, and he has his rifle."

"I wish I dared call to those three people and warn them!"

"But he'd throw me from the cliff if I did so, for his face is as black as a thunder-cloud."

"How many people are on the wreck, girl?" asked Wambold, creeping to the spot occupied by Lita.

"I see but three."

The man motioned her to the side, and took her place, at the same time gazing down upon the wreck.

Behind him came his son, and then his wife, for she seemed not to care to return to the cabin.

It was very evident that he was greatly shaken up by finding the coffin.

The man did not gaze long down upon those on the wreck, before he brought the butt of his rifle to his cheek, his eye ran along the sights, and the report followed.

A shriek came from below, and the Water Wolf quickly reloaded his rifle and again fired.

It was a strange act, even for a heart of stone, for the group he fired upon were two men bending over the body of a third.

At the second report another of the trio went down, while the third sprang to his feet and gazed about him in a dazed kind of way.

Then he gazed upward and beholding two little clouds of smoke floating away from the cliff, seemed to realize from whence the shots had come which had brought death to his comrades, and quickly he darted toward the companionway.

Just as he disappeared below a shot whizzed over his head, showing what his fate would have been had he remained longer in range of the deadly rifle on the cliff.

A grim smile rested upon the face of the Water Wolf, as he rose to his feet and gazed down upon the wreck.

"There is but one left, Leo, and we do not fear him."

"Come, wife, get us some breakfast, and by that time the waters will be quiet enough for us to go out to the wreck."

The woman called to Lita to accompany her, and they descended to the valley, from whence the two men soon saw a column of smoke arising.

After awhile, as the man on the wreck did not again appear, they went down to the cabins and had breakfast.

"Girl, you row us out to the wreck, for Leo and myself must go ready to meet foes," said Wambold.

"I will go, too," said the woman.

"Why, wife, I believe you fear to be left alone, since we found the coffins," remarked Wambold.

"I do not care to be alone, and so will go with you," she responded with a shudder, and the four started for the beach.

The two coffins had been filled with rocks and sunk, so that they did not meet their eyes, and getting into a life-skiff, they started out of the basin, Lita at the oars, the woman at the tiller, and the two men, armed with pistols and cutlass, ready to spring on board.

It was a hard pull, for the waves yet ran rough; but Lita pulled a strong and steady stroke, and the life-skiff soon ran alongside the brig, under its lee.

Springing on board, the two men were confronted by a man who just then emerged from the cabin.

He was in civilian's dress, and evidently a passenger on the ill-fated craft.

From his lookout he had seen the skiff approaching, and beholding women in it, he had dreaded no danger, and stepped forward to greet the wreckers.

But in an instant he saw his mistake, as Leo quickly raised his pistol, and shouted in pleading tones:

"Great God! don't kill me!"

But with the last word came the flash and report.

He had appealed to one who was as merciless as his father, and the answer was a bullet in his heart.

With a cry he sunk dead upon the deck, while the two Water Wolves sprang down into the cabin, the woman and the girl at the same time clambering upon deck, armed with cutlass and pistols, and serving as a reserve guard for the two men.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALONE ON THE DEATH ROCK.

For a few moments the woman and maiden stood in suspense after the disappearance below of Wambold and his son, and then the latter reappeared.

"All right! no one else on board."

"He was the last," he said, as he stepped to

the side of the dead man and coolly searched his pockets, while his mother went forward and as calmly did likewise with the two who had fallen before the rifle-shots early in the morning.

"She's got a rich cargo, wife, and it is not water-soaked, either, so we are in big luck," cried Wambold, coming from the cabin.

Under his directions then they all began to bring articles of every description on deck, and pile them on the lee side.

This occupied them until late in the afternoon, they partaking of edibles found on board for a dinner.

"The sea has run down enough now, Lita, to bring the sloop alongside, so go after her," said Wambold.

Lita sprang into the skiff and, seizing the oars, soon disappeared from sight in the cut in the rocky wall of the island; but in a short while the sharp prow of a stanch sloop shot out of the basin with the young girl at the helm.

It was the larger of the two crafts that had been anchored in the island harbor, and, guided with wonderful skill, she was run out between the reefs and laid alongside of the brig's stern, when the Water Wolves quickly made her fast.

At once the work began of loading the little vessel with the booty taken from the wreck, and so earnest were the Water Wolves in their occupation that they again made a meal on the vessel, and kept busy until late in the night, when they slept in the cabin.

With the first glimmer of dawn Wambold arose and waking his son, they ran the sloop into the basin and unloaded it alongside of a small pier.

Returning to the brig, they found breakfast prepared by the woman, while Lita was hard at work bringing the lighter articles of the cargo from below.

Thus the work went on, until all that was valuable had been transferred to the sloop, or thrown overboard, such things as could be, to drift into the basin and land on the beach.

"This is the best haul of our stay here, wife," said Wambold with enthusiasm, as they left the brig, after setting her on fire.

"By far."

"I shall at once load the sloop with the choicest of the cargo, and sail for Havana," continued Wambold.

"Yes, it is a good idea for us to begin to get rid of the great quantity of booty we have on hand and turn it into gold."

"True, for we have enough in the store-house now for two loads for the sloop, not to count the cargo of the brig."

"But I shall carry the most valuable first, and then follow with other loads according to their value, until old Hamtrank has our booty and we have his gold."

"When shall you start, Alfred?"

"To-morrow night, wife."

"I shall accompany you."

"What?"

"I shall go with you," was the firm response.

"But you will not be able to do Leo's work, wife."

"Let Leo go too of course."

"And Lita?"

"Leave her here to watch the beacon."

"Alone?"

"Why not?"

"Will she remain?"

"How can she help herself?"

"Well, if you say so, yes."

"I do say so."

"We might as well take the girl too."

"And thus lose a chance of getting some rich prize that may be wrecked during our absence."

"True."

"We will not be gone very long, and—"

"But, wife, since the finding of the coffins, the girl may be afraid to remain."

"Bah! can you tell me what that girl ever feared?"

"No, she certainly seems fearless; but then I would not have harm befall her, especially now, when we intend to be repaid for all the care she has been to us."

"No harm will befall her, my word on it."

"But may not the phantoms visit the island?"

"No, for the Phantom Pirate is not cruising in these waters now, as you know, and is not due here for a month."

"You are right, so we will leave the girl here alone."

This decision was carried out, for the next night the sloop of the Water Wolves, laden down with her ill-gotten cargo, set sail from the island, and Lita stood calmly upon the cliff above the Death's Head Beacon, watching it gliding away over the moonlit waters, and seemingly indifferent to the fact that she had been left alone on that dread rock, the home of the cruel wreckers of the Bahamas.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BONO'S STRATEGY.

It will not do to leave Bono too long neglected, for he was by no means idle, during the scenes narrated in the last few chapters.

It will be remembered that he was last seen by the unfortunate spy of the Sea Monster,

going on board a small vessel at night, accompanied by a number of men.

It may rightly be inferred from this, that the innkeeper, Miguel, kept his faith with Bono, and had the crew the youth had ordered him to ship, ready at the appointed time.

As the Sea Monster had surmised, Bono had gone down to capture the private schooner.

The idea had occurred to him, that, where chance had placed such an opportunity before him, he would take advantage of it.

He would not put the bounds of the law upon the pirate chief himself; but he determined to capture his schooner and use it for his own purposes.

The Sea Monster had refused to allow the men, who had been in the boat with him, to leave, and he knew that the outlaw would be merciless to him, did the opportunity so occur; hence he was anxious to get the boat's crew out of their scrape, and also to seize the means at hand to aid him in the search for his sister.

He well knew that he was taking a noted pirate craft, and would be sailing without commission; but as he would not raise the black flag, or commit an act of piracy, he did not fear the results.

He expected to find booty enough on the schooner, belonging to the Sea Monster, to pay his crew for their services, and, as the said booty had been taken at the pistol's muzzle and cutlass's point on the high seas, he did not scruple in using it.

As for the Sea Monster, leaving him ashore would be a fitting punishment for him, while he would serve the Government in depriving the red-handed wretch of his vessel.

So argued Bono, before he determined to act in the matter; but having made up his mind to his course, he acted with promptness and daring.

Planning and plotting were not accomplishment and success; but he was not one to falter.

The schooner lay hidden in a lagoon on the Gulf shore, and there were not two-score men on board, counting his boat's crew.

Seeing him leading, if it came to an attack to seize the schooner, the boat's crew would aid him, while the surprise would be half the battle, not to speak of his having superior numbers to start with.

But Bono wished to avoid bloodshed if possible; but if necessary, he would not shrink from making it flow freely.

So he decided upon strategy to aid him.

Returning in the same coaster in which he had left the schooner with the pirate chief was in his favor, and it would naturally be believed that any story he might tell would not be doubted.

Running down the river without adventure, he held along the coast until he came in the vicinity of the schooner's hiding-place.

Here he ran into a bayou, and put all but four of the men in three extra boats which he had brought with him, giving them certain orders to carry out until his return.

These four men he had won over from the crew who had gone up with the chief, and he felt convinced of their faithfulness to him.

Then the little craft was headed for the bayou, and under a light breeze ran into the retreat.

The schooner was anchored fore and aft across the bayou, her broadside commanding the advance, and a boat was kept half a mile seaward on the lookout.

This boat had two men in it, who, recognizing the coaster, awaited its approach and were taken in tow.

Bono then ran into the lagoon and laid alongside of the schooner, being met as he jumped on board by the pirate lieutenant.

"Where is the chief, lad?"

"In the city, senor, and he sent me down to tell you that there is a richly-freighted vessel to sail soon for the Indies, and he wishes to seize her."

"Ah! I shall gladly do that," said the officer, delightedly.

"He says, senor, that a shipper has orders to get a crew of thirty men for her, and that he wishes to put his men on board, and will himself take passage."

"When out of the Balize he will seize the vessel, and you are to be on the watch, ten days from to-day, and meet him."

"I'll be there, lad; but does he expect me to send the men from the schooner?"

"Yes, sir; for he says you will have no need of them, and that as soon as I carry the men to the Balize, I will return with the extra hands he has shipped, and who are coming down to meet me in a fishing-smack, which will take these men up to the city."

"Good! And don't delay about it, for I don't like leaving the schooner with less than a dozen men on board; but the chief must be obeyed."

With this the lieutenant called to the men to get ready to go in the coaster, while Bono managed to have a few minutes' conversation with the coxswain who had been picked up in the boat with him by the pirate.

As soon as all was in readiness, the little craft was cast loose and started upon her way.

Bono felt that he was playing a daring, al-

most desperate game, for, if he was suspected of treachery, his life would be the immediate forfeit.

His story, told the pirate lieutenant, seemed plausible if not dissected; but, if questioned, he knew flaws could be readily found in it, for it seemed hardly probable that the Sea Monster would send a shipment of mendo in a fishing-smack, when the coaster was going directly to the schooner.

There seemed no reason why the alleged change should be made from the fishing-smack to the coaster; but Bono did not know how else he could plausibly get possession of the pirate craft.

Also, he wished to return the coaster to the overseer and his negro crew, after she had served his purpose.

Therefore he told the story he did, and was delighted to see that the pirate officer believed it.

Having run up the coast, to a point near the Balize, and near a fishing-hamlet, Bono ordered the helmsman to head inshore.

"The smack is not in sight, so we will await her here, and you lads can go ashore and treat yourselves to grog," he said to the subaltern in charge, and he handed out a purse well filled with gold.

The crew were delighted at this generosity and privilege, and, quickly availing themselves of it, they were soon ashore, heading for the only little store in the hamlet, and where they knew they could obtain the grog they so loved.

Hardly had they disappeared in the distance, when Bono called to the crew of four men to get the anchor up and set sail.

This was quickly done, and the craft glided away, and was half a league distant when the astonished seamen emerged from the grog-shop and discerned her.

They stood dumfounded for a moment, and then it gradually dawned upon them that they had been duped.

There was a brisk breeze blowing, and the coaster was heading rapidly back toward the retreat of the schooner.

In dismay they looked about them.

A few boats and fishing-skiffs were a quarter of a mile distant on the cove beach; but the fishing-smacks belonging to the hamlet were far off there fishing.

To capture the coaster would be impossible, and they knew that they had been thoroughly tricked, and did not doubt that the design of the youth was against the schooner, while they could only make their way to the city as best they could, and seek other vessels in which to sail the blue seas.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FLAGLESS CRUISER.

HAVING so cleverly gotten rid of the pirate crew, Bono at once headed in the coaster toward the bayou where he had left the boat early that morning.

If they had not proven treacherous and deserted him, he knew that half of the battle was won, for the pirate schooner lay at anchor three leagues distant with but a dozen men on board, and his own boat's crew formed one-third of that number.

Tabor, the pirate lieutenant was no man to tamely submit if he suspected treachery, and he would be the difficult one to handle.

But if he held no suspicion against him, Bono knew that all would go well.

After a rapid run he glided into the inlet, where he had parted from the boats, and beheld the men on shore, getting ready to embark and come out to him.

The smoke of camp-fires was visible, and the odors of roasting meats came off to the coaster on the land breeze, showing that they had killed some game and cooked it.

Having gotten the men on board, with quantities of game which they had slain during their day's sport, the crew hauled their boats on deck and the coaster sped away to further carry out her perilous duty.

It was sunset when the moss-hung cypress trees came in sight, which bid the pirate schooner from view, and darkness was settling down as the little vessel entered the lagoon.

The lookouts in the boats hailed her, and were taken in tow, and the craft swept on slowly up toward the schooner, for the tall trees draped with moss, shut off the breeze almost altogether in that sheltered nook.

"Ho, the coaster!" hailed Lieutenant Tabor from the pirate's deck.

"Ay, ay, sir, we have come back with the new crew," answered Bono.

"All right, run alongside and we'll have a look at them; but if the chief shipped them I'll guarantee that they are a precious lot of sinners," answered the officer, inclined to be facetious.

A moment after the coaster glided alongside of the schooner and Bono sprung on board.

Approaching the officer, while the seamen also boarded the schooner, the youth suddenly leveled a pistol full at his head and cried sternly:

"Senor, you are my prisoner. Surrender,

and I spare your life, but resist and I shall kill you."

The buccaneer officer was wholly taken aback.

What to do he knew not.

He saw that it was no joke, for Bono looked in deadly earnest.

He glanced over his crew and saw that the men picked up with the youth, had separated themselves from those of the schooner.

These, seven in number were grouped together in evident alarm.

Those who had boarded from the coaster were all around, and they stood ready to obey the slightest order of their young leader.

Among the crowd he recognized those whom the chief had taken with him to serve as a crew for the coaster, and to one of these he appealed.

"Harvey, what does this mean?" he asked.

"It means, sir, that the captain has been tricked by the young skipper there, and we sail under a new chief, sir," was the answer of the man Harvey.

"And the chief?" queried the lieutenant, becoming a shade whiter.

"May be hanged by this time, sir, for all I know."

"No, your chief is safe, for I was not treacherous toward him."

"I wanted your schooner for myself, and so I have seized her; but had I meant to harm her crew, I could have given the Sea Monster over to the officers of the law, and carried this craft by boarding, when all of you would have suffered the penalties of your crimes."

"Instead, I have peaceably taken possession of her, and you, senor, and your men can go in your boats along the coast to a fishing-hamlet, where you will find the remainder of your crew, and can readily make your way up to the city."

"The address of your chief, senor, I will give to you, so that you can find him on your arrival, and you can say to him that I have taken his schooner for a cruise on my own hook, and if he wants her, he will have to hunt for her upon the high seas."

"And also add, senor, that he will not find her under the black flag, or doing piratical work; but, as I have no flag of my own, I shall let her cruise without one."

"I suppose you have the good sense to submit quietly?" and Bono eyed the pirate officer, who seemed to be growing very impatient.

"Not if these men will follow me to a free life upon the seas and plenty of booty," shouted the officer, and he turned to the men.

Such an appeal was a dangerous one to wild spirits like theirs, Bono well knew, and he acted promptly.

Thrusting the muzzle of his pistol hard in the face of the pirate officer, he said sternly and in a loud tone:

"One word more, sir, and you will lead them only to death!"

"Surrender, or die!"

There was no mistaking the situation now being wholly against him; but the officer was stubborn, and glancing along the line of men, he felt that he detected a feeling among the greater part of them to follow him to a life of piracy, rather than the doubtful fortunes of a mere boy.

So, striking up the pistol, he shouted:

"Men, follow me to fortune, all of you!"

The pistol exploded above his head, but though taken a sudden disadvantage, Bono was quick in recovering his lost ground, and though his cutlass was grasped in his left hand, he swung it round with remarkable quickness, and the pirate officer felt its full weight ere he could draw his own weapon.

Down to the deck he sunk with a moan, while Bono, without glancing at him, turned to the crew and called out:

"Does any man here wish to follow after their leader?"

A silence fell upon the crew, and after a moment's waiting for response, Bono continued:

"Toss him overboard, lads, and you who wish to go to the city get into the boats and pull for the fishing-hamlet."

Half a dozen men availed themselves of this privilege, and pulled rapidly away, while the new crew of the schooner were set to work, Bono selecting his officers from among them.

Then the overseer and his negro crew were brought on deck, set free and told to go on board their craft and set sail, a permission which they were only too glad to avail themselves of, and half an hour after both vessels were slowly moving out of the bayou, the coaster to seek port and the captured schooner to sail the sea, a flagless cruiser upon the wide waters.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SECRET OF THE RAMON VILLA.

IN one wing of the Ramon Villa, and the one that was on the water side, a woman was seated in deep thought.

The room overlooked a beautiful flower garden, and was in the second story of the villa.

Strange to say iron gratings barred the

window, as it did others in that part of the mansion, and gave it a prison-like look.

Those that overlooked the town and highway, from other parts of the structure, had no iron bars to guard them.

Why then the windows of this wing on the water side?

No one could get a glimpse of these windows, for the little fort shut them out from a boat passing on the water, and the garden about the wing was walled in securely, and only a gardener was seen at times there, excepting early in the morning and after sunset, when the one who then sat in the upper room, and an old negress, were out for an airing in the flower-scented retreat.

The lady now seated by the window, and buried in deep meditation, was clad in the garb of a nun, and even this simple dress could not hide the wondrous beauty of form she possessed, while her face was one of rare loveliness.

A sadness seemed to rest about the beautiful eyes, while her mouth at times became almost stern, as certain thoughts rushed through her mind.

The room was large, with others opening into it, and furnished with a degree of luxury uncommon in those earlier days.

A harp stood in one corner, a guitar lay upon a divan, and there were easy couches inviting one to repose, books with which to while away hours otherwise tedious, and baskets of fruit, decanters of wine and sweetmeats stood upon a sideboard.

The view from the room was certainly most inviting, with the flower garden beneath, a forest of magnolias upon one hand, a stretch of lawn upon the other, the little fort in front, and the waters of the harbor and blue Gulf beyond.

A more desirable home one could not desire; but yet those iron bars across the windows proved that those rooms could not be more than a gilded cage.

Presently, from an inner room an old negress entered.

She was past the meridian of life, yet strongly built, and her face wore a look of cunning and kindness of heart blended.

"Missy, won't you trow 'way dat darksome dress you 'sists on wearin', an' put on dis lily-white one dat gib sunshine to your face?" said the old negress, bearing in her hands a beautiful dress of some soft, whiet material.

"No, good Ninah, I intend to wear the robe of a *religieuse* for the rest of my life now, as I have done with the joys of this world," said the lady in a low, sad tone.

"Now jist don't talk dat way, missy, for you is too young and han'some to gib up de life de goo' Lord lets you lib, an' we kin some day be happy, when we gits out ob dis, ef yer don't consent ter marry de senor as he wants you to do."

"I shall never marry him, Ninah, and if I escape from here it will be to go to some convent and ask to be taken in as a nun, while my riches I will give to the church in atonement for my sins."

"Your sins hain't very heavy, missy."

"Ah, you do not know how heavy they are, Ninah."

"But I was a child of Fate, as it were, and circumstances made me drift into what I was, and as a punishment I am now what I am."

"You is a priz'ner, dat's a fact, missy; but you hab but to say de word, and de senor will make you his wife, an' all dis place will be your own."

"That word I will not say, Ninah," firmly answered the lady.

"Den I fears we bofe hab to stay here until we dies, for de senor do hab a heart of iron when he git minded dat way."

"And I have a will of iron, ay, and a heart of stone, Ninah, and he can never bend the one or break the other."

"He entrapped me, and I was a fool to trust him; but I have only myself to blame, and if I suffer, why suffering has become natural to me of late," and rising, the woman paced to and fro.

Presently there came a tap at an inner door, and Ninah, the negress, went quickly to open it.

It was the Senor Rudolph Ramon, and he begged an interview with the Senora Rita.

"It is granted, for it cannot be refused, Ninah," murmured the beautiful woman,

and the senor was ushered into the luxuriously-furnished sitting-room.

"I hope I find you well, lady," he said in a pleasant way.

"In body, yes, in heart and mind, no," was the cold reply.

"I would that you could feel different, senora, and make up your mind to be my wife, as I have urged, and then every act of my life should be kindness to you, and devoted to making you happy," and the man spoke earnestly.

"Senor Ramon, I will say that you are certainly most kind now, in all but one thing, granting me freedom; but your kindness is the same that one might show to a caged bird."

"I am in your power, and you keep me here, hoping that I will break through with my resolve and become your wife."

"I do, lady, for I love you."

"And I love the memory of the man who was my husband, and can never regard another in the same light."

"I ask you to be my wife, and trust to my winning your love?"

"No, it cannot be, and I beg you, senor, to release me from this prison, for it is nothing else, and I will bless you, ay, and pray for you, for, within the walls of a convent I intend to seek a haven of rest, there to live until death calls me away."

"No, lady, I cannot submit to your so sacrificing yourself."

"Sacrifice! why, senor, did I never see the light of day, after I entered a convent's walls, that sacrifice would be a blessing compared with being your wife."

"You hate me, then?" said the senor in a sorrowful, rather than an angry tone.

"I certainly have had no cause to do otherwise, for I know you as you are."

"As the wife of a dead pirate, the daughter of a smuggler, can you upbraid me with sin," somewhat hotly said the man.

The woman's face flushed, and she replied:

"Senor, that I was both I do not deny."

"I was a smuggler's daughter; but he loved me well, and reared amid wild and sinful scenes, we saw not crime in all its enormity as the good of the world see it."

"I met one whose life I saved, and I loved him."

"He was flying from the gallows, for a crime committed, and I saved him, and, loving him, I became his wife."

"He turned to piracy, yes, and at last lost his life with the brand upon him."

"You had been his friend, and the friend of my father, who also died in outlawry, and I sought you, for I too had the law hounds after me."

"You protected me, gave me shelter, concealed me from my foes, and I fled from the city under your escort."

"I deemed that I could secure your aid further in gaining revenge upon those who had slain my smuggler father and pirate husband, for, with ample riches at my command, I asked you to fit me out a vessel in which to run down my foes."

"You promised to do so, and with my old negress, who is as true as steel to me, brought me here in the garb of a nun."

"When you secured this place, I thought I had found a home of refuge until I could start upon my track of revenge."

"Instead, I found myself asked to marry you, and refusing, I was placed in this gilded cage to pine away at the thought of how my hopes had been thwarted."

"Have I spoken truly, senor?"

"You have, lady."

"Now I ask you to set me free, for I will not be your wife."

"You are grasping of gold, I well know, and I offer to repay you by a large ransom."

"And I refuse, lady."

"And you will not allow me to depart?"

"When you become my wife you shall be as free as an uncaged bird."

"You shall be mistress of this house, and sharer with me of all my wealth. We can live here together in happiness, and all will be well."

"And if I refuse still, senor?"

"Then here you must remain, lady."

"For how long?"

"Until you die!" was the almost savage rejoinder of the man, as he walked toward the door.

And turning, he continued:

"Lady Rita, you have but to summon me if you decide as I wish, and you are as free as the wind."

"But if you refuse, remember, these rooms are to be your prison and your tomb."

With a white, stern face the man left the room, and a moment after the sympathetic old negress crept to the side of her beautiful mistress to give her what consolation she could.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE YOUNG SAILOR'S STORY.

SEVERAL days after the strange interview between the Senor Ramon and the Lady Rita in the gilded prison of the latter, for the reader knows that it was nothing more, an armed craft dropped anchor in the harbor of San Augustine, and not very far from the foot of the Ramon villa.

In running up to her anchorage, under easy sail and a light breeze, the yacht had won the admiration of many persons watching her from the shore, not only on account of her beauty and symmetry of hull, but also for her remarkable speed.

If there was anything about the armed yacht's appearance to criticise, it would be the fact that her masts were very tall for a vessel of her light tonnage, and her spars also seemed large enough for a craft double her size.

But her hull was deep, and stanch, clinging well to the water, and this enabled her to be able to carry a vast amount of canvas.

She was armed with three pivot-guns, mounted forward, aft and amidships, the first two named being large indeed, for a small vessel, but evidently intended to keep an enemy at bay if forced to fly, and to overhaul a prize by a shot at long range.

There were also two broadside brass twelve-pounders, and three other pieces being on pivots, it gave her a heavy broadside of four guns.

About her masts were stacks of muskets, and cutlasses and pistols were in brackets along the bulwarks.

Her whole appearance was that of a vessel held under perfect discipline, while her crew, something under two-score all told, were attired in tidy uniforms, and stood about as though ready to be called to duty at any time.

Upon her quarter-deck, gazing through their glasses at the town as the yacht drew near, were three young officers.

They all wore the uniform and rank of midshipmen, though one of them was readily picked out as the acting captain of the craft.

He was perhaps the youngest of the trio of youthful officers, but a handsome, dashing fellow, who carried boldness and decision stamped indelibly upon his face.

"There is the Orleans packet we spoke, Captain Brandt," remarked one of the midships, addressing his commander by courtesy with the title of captain, and he pointed to the vessel in which the Sea Monster had been a passenger to St. Augustine.

"Yes, so I see, and I am glad to see that she got in safely."

"I must ask her skipper if she ran across any pirates," answered the young commander, and turning to the helmsman he directed where to run for an anchorage, remarking after so doing:

"That is a beautiful villa and grounds yonder."

"It is indeed, sir, and the owner doubtless has plenty of gold to maintain such a place," answered one, while the other midshipman rejoined:

"I have been observing that place closely, and it certainly is a grand home, and evidently belongs to some old Spanish Don; but I like your home on the Mississippi Sound, Captain Brandt, fully as well, if not better."

"I have the same idea; but it may be partiality for one's own home," answered young Brandt with a smile, and then he turned his gaze from Ramon villa to the town.

The anchor was soon let fall, and shortly after the youthful commander, accompanied

by one of his officers, was rowed ashore, and walked up to the inn just as the sun was setting.

Wishing to take supper ashore they ordered a good meal of mine host and took a stroll about the quaint old town.

Upon their return they found that the landlord had indeed set before them a most delightful repast, and they discussed it with a relish that did credit to his *cuisine*.

While enjoying their cigars upon the piazza after supper, they were approached by a handsome young sailor who touching his hat politely said:

"Pardon, gentlemen, but you are from the little cruiser that put into port this afternoon?"

"We are, sir," answered the young commander in a respectful tone, for there was that in the man's appearance to command respect.

"Do you think I could see the captain if I went on board, sir?"

"I am in command of the yacht, so how can I serve you?"

A look of intense surprise passed over the man's face, at the youth of the yacht's commander; but he responded quietly:

"Then, sir, I wish to make known to you how you can do good service to-night."

"I am always ready for any good service, so out with it, my man."

"Well, sir, I cannot tell you how I know it; but it has come to my knowledge that an attack will be made at midnight upon a villa situated a mile down the shore, and where it is known the owner keeps his riches and quantities of silver plate."

"Ha! this is indeed news; but who is to make this marauding attack?" asked the young midshipman with earnestness.

"It will be made, sir, by a band of buccaneers, whose vessel will run in and land them near the villa."

"What buccaneers are they, my man, or do you know?"

"They are what are known as the Reef Pirates, sir, but they are a bad lot."

"Ah yes, they are indeed, and in their small vessels they frequently defy pursuit; but they are not generally in large force."

"To-night they will have a full crew out, some twenty men, as they know the owner of the villa keeps a number of servants."

"And how know you this, my man?"

"That I cannot tell you, sir; but the raid is to take place, and I felt that you, as an officer of the navy would like to protect the villa and at the same time capture the pirates, when their vessel, which will be lightly manned, with her crew gone, can easily fall into your hands."

"You plan well, my man; but what motive have you in urging this, when your refusing to give me full information, leads me to suspect that you are in some way connected with these same pirates?" and the midshipman commander looked sternly in the face of the man.

But he met the gaze unflinchingly, and, after a moment, answered:

"I will frankly say, sir, that I am a sailor ashore, at present in hard luck, and I need a little gold, which I know the owner of the villa will give me if I protect his property."

"You shall have it, my man, and a berth on board my yacht with me, too; but have you formed any plan to thwart these pirates?"

"Yes, sir, my idea was to come out to your yacht, as soon as I had seen a person that might give me further information, and pilot you and your men to a spot where you could ambush the pirates, after they had made a landing, and thus capture them all, for they will have to march a mile overland from their vessel."

"Good! Now go to this man from whom you wish to get more information—"

"It is not a man, sir."

"Ah! there is a woman in the case, then?" said Brandt, with a smile.

"I may as well confess, sir, that I am aiding one who has cause to hate these same pirates, and she acts from a motive of revenge in the matter."

"I see; well, we will avenge her, and give you gold."

"Take this purse, and come on board as soon as you can, and we will be ready to start," and the midshipman slipped several gold pieces into the hand of the young sea-

man, who thanked him kindly for them, and touching his hat, departed.

As soon as he had disappeared down the street, the two young officers arose and hastened to the landing to go on board their yacht, the Sea Owl.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TREACHERY.

AFTER the young sailor had walked some distance from the tavern, and knew that he was out of sight of the two midshipmen on the piazza, he turned and retraced his way slowly.

Watching closely, he saw the young officers leave the inn, and then he walked swiftly forward and entered it.

As though familiar with the place, he ascended to an upper floor and tapped three times upon a door.

"Come in!" said a deep voice within.

Entering, he found himself in a pleasant room, in which there was but one occupant.

That occupant was none other than the Sea Monster.

A tray, with the remnants of a supper, sat on a table near, and the pirate chief was enjoying his after-supper cigar.

"Well, Benedict, I was wondering if you would put in an appearance to-night," he said pleasantly.

"Yes, captain, for I have news for you."

"Out with it."

"The armed yacht Sea Owl came into port to-day."

"I saw her run up the harbor and she made four knots out of a mere catspaw breeze."

"She's a sailer, sir; but I have seen her captain."

"The Planter Midshipman?"

"Yes, sir, and he's as handsome as a girl."

"Yes, and as dangerous as a tiger."

"Hands off that young middy, Benedict, unless you know your strength."

"I believe you, sir; but I had a long talk with him."

"About what?"

"I told him a little story that interested him."

"Well?"

"I gave him to understand, captain, that I was a sailor ashore and in hard luck."

"And he offered you a berth?"

"He did, indeed."

"And did you accept?" and a flash of suspicion shone in the eyes of the pirate chief.

"Of course, captain; but I told him that the Reef Pirates intended to attack the villa of an old and rich Spaniard down the shore a mile, and offered to guide him to a spot where he could ambush them, and also capture their craft."

"Well?"

"He bit at the bait on my hook, and arranged for me to come on board within the hour and pilot him to the spot."

"What does all this tend to, Benedict?" asked the Sea Monster somewhat impatiently.

"I told him I would be there, sir."

"What nonsense."

"Of course, captain, but then it was part of my plot, for I shall send another man."

"Why do you not out with it all at once, Benedict, for I cannot see why young Brandt should trust you in such a case, knowing nothing about you, and when he must suspect that you belonged to the pirate band to thus know of their movements."

"No, captain, I led him to believe I had a sweetheart—"

"Which you doubtless have, and a score of them."

"Oh, yes, but I led Captain Brandt to think my sweetheart had suffered at the hands of the pirates, and, instigated by revenge, intended to betray them."

"Now, I intend to send a young man to guide the boats to the spot—"

"What spot?"

"An imaginary spot down the coast, sir; and when they have gone, I will get our men into boats, and after half an hour pull for the yacht."

"Of course they will think on board that the boats are those that belong to the yacht returning, and we can readily board and cut her out, for not more than four or five men will be left in charge."

"By Neptune! but your words ring now like true steel, Benedict, and the plan shall

work well; but how many men have you shipped?"

"Forty-five, sir."

"Which, with you and I, will make forty-seven."

"Can you collect them at once?"

"They are in the Anchor Inn now, sir, for I ordered them to be in readiness when I saw the yacht coming into port."

"You have done well; but the boats?"

"Can readily be obtained, sir, at the beach."

"Good! then I will get ready and go with you."

"If you please, captain, as soon as I write a note to the young captain."

"Here are pen, ink and paper, so write it here."

Benedict took up a quill and soon wrote:

"TO CAPTAIN BRANDT, Commanding Sea Owl:—"

"SIR:—I send you a man who will serve in my place as a pilot, as I go down to the scene of the pirates' landing, with a note from the woman of whom I spoke, and which will lead them more thoroughly into your power, as they do not suspect her of being a traitress."

"Trust the bearer as you would your humble servant, and I will meet you at the proper time."

"Your obedient servant,"

"Benedict, a Sailor of Fortune."

Having addressed and sealed this letter, Benedict left the inn, accompanied by the Sea Monster, and the two wended their way to the low tavern where the crew were in waiting.

Selecting a man to bear the letter, and giving him certain instructions, he paid him liberally, and saw him go down to the beach and hail the yacht.

A response came, and soon a boat put off for the shore and the messenger was taken on the boat.

"Now to see if it works all right," said the Sea Monster, who stood watching the messenger with Benedict.

Half an hour passed, and then they saw two boats filled with men leave the yacht and pull down the coast with muffled oars.

"Now the yacht is mine," said the Sea Monster in his deep tones, and the two hastily retraced their way to the tavern to get their men together, and both of them greatly elated at the success thus far of the plot to capture the graceful Sea Owl.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A DISCARDED SWEETHEART.

As Midshipman Brandt and his companion reached the beach after leaving the inn, and were about to hail the yacht for a boat to come ashore, a form suddenly glided up to them.

It was a woman, with a slight form, graceful and evidently youthful, though she wore a veil.

"One moment, please, gentlemen."

The two midshipmen turned and doffed their hats respectfully, for there was that about the woman which did not denote a mendicant, as they could see even in the darkness.

"You are from the armed yacht?" continued the woman.

"Yes, lady," answered Irving Brandt.

"You have just returned from the Good Cheer Inn?"

"We have."

"You met there a sailor?"

"Yes."

"A young man, with a dark, handsome face?"

"You have described him."

"He told you he was in ill-luck ashore?"

"Yes, lady."

"And gave you some information of an important character?"

"You seem well informed, lady."

"Sir, that man has deceived you," said the woman, impressively.

"Deceived me?" and Brandt started.

"Yes. He has led you astray by his story."

"In what respect?"

"He has gotten your consent to leave your vessel, on some excuse, with your crew."

"Well?"

"What his story to you was, I cannot do more than conjecture, but his aim is to get you and your men to leave your vessel on some pretended expedition of profit or good."

"But why?"

"To seize your craft!"

"Ha! this is a bold charge to make."
 "It is a true one, sir."
 "In these troublous times it seems plausible, certainly; but how know you this?"
 "From what I know of the man."
 "You know him well then?"
 "Yes."
 "He is your friend, or—"
 "He *was* my friend, sir, but now he is my foe."
 "Ah!"

"He professed to love me, and winning my love, has cast me aside. You see I am frank with you, sir."

"And I appreciate your frankness, lady, and thank you for it. But cannot you tell me more?"

"I can only tell you, sir, that, knowing that he was treacherous to me, I determined to avenge myself upon him; and I learned his plans, and now tell you to thwart him," and the woman's husky, trembling voice showed that she was deeply moved.

"But what motive has he?"

"He casts me off because he has met another face fairer than mine."

"I meant what motive had he for seizing my vessel?"

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten that my troubles only interest myself," she said, sadly; and then she added: "His motive is to turn pirate."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and he has some friend who is his ally, and who is stopping at the Good Cheer Inn, and they have been plotting together for days to get a vessel."

"They already have a crew, I believe, and when you leave your vessel to-night they will board her and cut her out."

"A well-laid scheme, lady, and I thank you most sincerely, and, if there is aught I can do to prove my appreciation of your kindness, command me."

"There is but one thing, sir."

"If you are in need, say so frankly."

"I am not in need, for my parents are comfortably off, and I live with them."

"But my love has turned to hate, and all I ask you is to capture and hang the man who has thus deceived you," and her voice was hoarse with passion as she spoke.

"I think you will be fully avenged if he falls into my hands, lady."

"Thank you, and heed my warning, and do not leave your vessel."

With this the woman glided away, and the two young officers looked at each other in amazement.

"What do you think of that, Herbert?" asked Brandt.

"I believe her."

"And so do I, for you know the old saying about a woman scorned."

"Well, I shall play a trick upon that fine fellow."

"How can you, captain?"

"I will go on board the yacht and then row over to the packet, and borrow from the captain his crew."

"These men I will have on board the yacht when that fellow comes, to go in the boats, while my crew will be in hiding below."

"Thinking the Sea Owl is nearly deserted, the pirates will attack, and we can let them come into our trap, while I will order the men going with this traitor to seize him, as soon as they are some distance away, and when the fight begins, to return in all haste, so that none of the outlaws can get away."

"It is a glorious plan, and just like you, Irving," cried Harry Herbert, who, when alone with his captain was always on most friendly and familiar terms with him.

The boat, which had been called from the yacht lying two cables' length off-shore, now touched the beach, and the midshipmen sprang into it.

After letting Herbert get on board to begin to get things ready for a reception for the boarders, Irving Brandt rowed to the packet-ship, anchored a quarter of a mile distant, and told his story to the captain, who at once enlisted in the cause with all of his crew excepting two men left to guard the vessel.

Half an hour after, dressed in the uniforms of the yacht's crew, the packet's seamen held the yacht's deck, her men being below, armed to the teeth.

Just then a hail came from the shore, and

a boat was sent thither after the man who had so cleverly arranged to capture the yacht.

It was not Benedict himself, as the reader already knows, but the messenger whom he had sent in his stead.

Midshipman Brandt took the letter and read it carefully.

Then he said:

"I am sorry, my man, the one who sent this is not to be our pilot; but you will doubtless serve as well, and I will send an officer and twenty-five men with you."

"Better send all you can spare, sir," suggested the messenger.

"I have to leave several men on board to look after the yacht."

"She's all right, lying in this port, and one man could take charge of her, while you may need all in the fight, for them Reef Pirates is bad fellows."

The man's urging the yacht to be stripped of her crew was just reason for Midshipman Brandt to feel that the woman had told him the truth, as was also the fact that the young sailor himself did not put in an appearance on board, but sent a letter by a messenger.

"I can spare but twenty-four men and an officer, my man."

"Hain't you going?"

"No."

"That will leave you, another officer and four men on the yacht," said the messenger, in a way that showed he was counting those left behind.

"Yes; but now be off, for it is not very far to midnight."

The messenger went over the side into the boat, whither the men had already preceded him, and the party pulled swiftly away with muffled oars.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ATTACK.

BENEDICT and the Sea Monster laid their plans well.

The lieutenant of the pirate chief had been untiring in his efforts to secure a crew, and, as far as villainy went, he had made a success of it, for a harder set of cut-throats were not to be picked up, along the Gulf shores, than those he had gotten together.

The Sea Monster, upon going to the inn where they were in waiting, looked them over and pronounced them to be "prime fellows."

With such a recommendation from such a source, the reader can readily imagine that they were a hard lot.

After the messenger had been sent with the letter to Irving Brandt, the pirate crew were gotten together, and ordered into two boats, which Benedict had secured through the landlord of the low tavern.

They were all well armed with cutlasses and pistols, and were anxious and ready for any undertaking.

They had been given just enough bad grog to make them reckless of consequences, and, that their fever might not die out, should they have to wait, Benedict had brought along two jugs of grog and pewter mugs, which were respectively placed in the boats commanded by himself and the Sea Monster.

Drawing off shore out of sight, the men lay on their oars, which were muffled, Benedict remaining at the inn to see when the boats went by from the yacht.

Impatiently he waited for some time, and then beheld two dark objects pull away from the yacht's side and go in the direction where he had said they could ambush the Reef Pirates.

After they had been gone by for some minutes he sprang into a light skiff, the landlord, who was himself no better than a pirate taking the oars, and went out to the waiting boats.

"Well?" simply asked the Sea Monster, as Benedict sprang into the stern sheets of his own boat.

"They have gone down the coast."

"Good! how many?"

"Two boat-loads."

"Then they doubtless took most of their crew?"

"Yes, sir."

"We shall soon know; but shall we make the move?"

"It would be better to wait a little while longer, so that they may think the boats went to the place and not finding the pirates, returned."

"You are right," and the Sea Monster and his crew sat in deep silence, while the landlord returned in his skiff to his tavern.

"Come, men, have a cup of grog around," said Benedict, as the time drew near for the move.

A general grunt of assent answered this invitation, showing that the pirate lieutenant had struck a chord that vibrated pleasantly in their hearts.

A few moments more and the Sea Monster said sternly:

"Give way, men!"

The oars dropped simultaneously into the water, which showed that Benedict had at least not gotten any land-lubbers.

In silence the boats moved on, for the oars had been muffled, and getting into the course, by which those from the yacht would be expected to return, they held on their way.

They drew quite near the yacht, as she lay dark and silent upon the waters, before the lookout caught sight of them.

Then he hailed:

"Boats ahoy!"

"Ahoy the Sea Owl!" answered Benedict.

"What boats are those?"

"The Sea Owl's boats returning," answered Benedict aloud, and then in a low tone he ordered:

"Give way hard!"

The next instant the two boats were alongside of the yacht, one on the starboard and the other on the port.

Over the bulwarks they sprang and half a hundred desperate men held possession of the deck.

Not a man was visible of the yacht's crew.

But suddenly the decks were illumined from aloft, ringing shots followed, and half a dozen pirates fell their length.

Again came the volley from above, and while others sunk in their tracks, a clear voice rung out like a trumpet:

"At them, lads, with a will!"

Out of the companionway then bounded Irving Brandt, a dozen men at his back, while from the forecastle came Midshipman Henry Herbert with as many more, and, to protect their advance from the rigging the other middy and his half-score of men sent rattling shots down upon the amazed pirates.

Attacked from above, hemmed in and charged upon both front and rear, surprised when they meant to surprise, killed when they meant to kill, and caught in their own trap as they fully realized, it was no wonder that the buccaneers became demoralized, and their enemies were upon them before a shot could be fired by their side.

Then the hoarse tones of the Sea Monster were heard:

"Men! seize this craft or you will all be hanged."

"Cut down these dogs, and hurl them overboard!"

Instantly a cheer answered the stirring words of their leader, and the pirates sprang to meet their foes.

But Midshipman Brandt had so well planned his defense and attack, that his men met the buccaneers with a bold front and deadly aim on one side, and with keen cutlasses on the others, while those in the rigging, hastening to the deck, joined in the combat.

The pirates had come on board outnumbering the yacht's crew; but death had quickly thinned their ranks, and as they saw that they had all they could do to defend themselves, and could not seize the schooner until their foes were subdued, they became demoralized in spite of the bravery of their giant chief and of Benedict.

Seeing this, the Sea Monster called them together for a rush over those who were opposing them aft, and as he started, he slipped and fell heavily.

Ere he could rise his sword had been struck from his hand by Irving Brandt, and the cutlass of the midshipman was pressed hard against his throat, while in stern tones came the words:

"Surrender, Sir Pirate, or you shall die this instant!"

"I have nothing else to do but surrender," was the surly answer, while the pirates, dismayed by the fall of their leader, rushed to the bulwarks and sprung over.

But many fell dead into the sea, and others never gained the bulwarks, though a few bold swimmers succeeded in escaping.

"Spring into those boats and pick those fellows up," shouted Irving Brandt, after he had firmly secured the dread chief, and a few more of the pirates were captured, though fully a score made their escape aided by the darkness, in spite of the boats coming up, with the packet's crew in them and joining in the search.

Of course the short but fierce battle on the yacht's deck had aroused the town, and all was excitement, the citizens not knowing just what had happened.

But Midshipman Brandt ordered a blue-light burned, that all might see the yacht was all right, and a loud cheer greeted him from the shore when it became known that the gallant little craft had beaten off its desperate foes, and killed and captured nearly two-thirds of its assailants.

"Now see if that young sailor who arranged this attack on the Sea Owl is among the killed, wounded or prisoners," said Midshipman Brandt, when the fight was over.

Search was at once made for Benedict, but nowhere was he or his body to be found.

He had clearly made his escape, and if not shot in the water after leaving the yacht, was then in some safe place rejoicing over his own good fortune and bemoaning the capture of the Sea Monster and disastrous result of his well-planned attempt to seize the Sea Owl.

CHAPTER XL.

FICKLE AS THE WIND.

IN a pretty little house of San Augustine, fronting the water, and with flower-gardens surrounding and stately trees sheltering it, sat a young girl the afternoon after the attack on the yacht by the pirates.

Her face was beautiful, though pale and sad, and her large eyes were red from weeping.

She was dressed in pure white, and leaned her elbows upon the window-sill, while her gaze was out upon the waters.

Presently her thoughts found vent in her speaking aloud.

"Oh, Manuel! are you dead? Are you forever lost to me?"

"And was it my act that cost you your life?"

"Am I your murderess—I, who loved you so?"

"But, my poor, dear Manuel, I believed you had cast me aside for another, and I am revengeful—oh, so revengeful! And my heart is now breaking at my act, for I know you are dead—dead, and through my act. Oh, Heaven forgive me!"

"As I forgive you, Clotilde!"

The deep voice of a man fell on her ears, and she sprang to her feet in alarm and leaned out of the window.

There, just at one side, stood the speaker. It was an old man, dressed like a coast planter, and leaning upon a cane.

The maiden started at sight of him, and said quickly:

It was Manuel's voice; but you are not Manuel.

Yes, I am Manuel, Clotilde, and I have come here to see you, and your words, which I overheard, made me very happy, for they told me that you loved me still.

The apparently old man stepped to the window with a nimble gait, and the maiden threw her arms about him and burst into tears.

"Come, sweet Clotilde, walk with me to the arbor, for I wish to talk with you, and it is best that you be not seen with a stranger."

"A stranger?"

"Yes, for my disguise makes me so to others."

"True, you are disguised, and well hidden beneath it; but why do you wear it, Manuel?"

"Come to the arbor and I will tell you all."

The maiden left the house, and the two walked to a vine-clad arbor, where they would be unobserved.

The man was Manuel Benedict, and he had come back to the woman he had cast off.

Was it because his heart smote him?

Was it because he feared her?

Let the sequel show.

Manuel Benedict had escaped death the night before, where so many had died by his side.

He was a bold swimmer, and when he saw that all was lost, he felt that he could better serve himself and his chief, by making his escape.

This he did by slipping over the side unseen, and striking out for the shore.

He had swum to the Anchor Inn, and the landlord had at once given him shelter, and gotten up the disguise he wore.

The next day he had heard all he cared to of the failure of his plan, and that the Sea Monster and half a dozen of his men were prisoners on board the yacht.

He at once determined upon their rescue, desperate as the undertaking seemed.

To effect this he needed aid, and who could better aid him than a woman.

Having concocted a plan, he set to work to carry it out.

His first step was to go to the home of his sweetheart.

He had to make his peace with her, for a week before they had parted in anger, and he was in the wrong, as man the more often is in lovers' quarrels.

He found Clotilde bemoaning his supposed death, and bemoaning that her act had caused it.

She was just in the mood for his purpose, and so he led her to the arbor.

"Clotilde," he said softly, taking her hand:

"I was wrong the other day to leave you as I did; but you took it too much in earnest and said severe things that angered me, and then it was I told you that I did not love you, but had given my affection to another."

"I was wrong, child, to speak falsely to you, for none other than you could I love, for you have been true to me, even when you found out that my life was a lawless one."

"And I will be, Manuel," said Clotilde, throwing her arms about her lover.

"But tell me, were you in the attack on the yacht last night?"

He hesitated an instant and then said:

"I will conceal nothing from you."

"I was."

Her face flushed and paled by turns, and then she asked:

"How did you escape?"

"I sprung overboard when I saw that all was lost."

For a moment or two she seemed lost in painful thought, and then she said:

"Manuel, I, too, have a confession to make, and will conceal nothing from you."

"I betrayed you last night."

"Great God!"

The words broke from the man's lips, and he turned pallid.

Her confession told him that he had a dangerous woman to deal with, and he felt that she was not one to trifle with, and knew that he must act cautiously.

"Forgive me, Manuel; but I am revengeful, and when you told me you loved another, knowing something of your plans, I determined to thwart them."

"And Heaven knows that you did; but, Clotilde, are you not willing to atone for your doubt of me and the harm you did?"

"How can I?"

"Aid me in saving the life of one to whom I owe my escape from the gallows."

"That one, through your act, now lies in irons on board the yacht, and will be carried to New Orleans for trial, when his death at the yard-arm will follow."

"You refer to the Sea Monster?"

"Yes, to Captain English, my friend."

"How can I aid you, Manuel?"

"You have it in your power to save him, and I know will do so for my sake."

"I will do all that I can, Manuel."

"I know that you will, my darling, and we will talk over together some plan of action," and the two sat down together to plot the rescue of the Sea Monster, the fickle girl having wholly forgiven her lover, and repented her act, now that she had him again, as she believed, all her own, for she could not fathom the heart of Manuel Benedict.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE PLOT TO RESCUE.

AFTER "backing and filling," as he called it, for some time, Manuel Benedict, who had already formed his plan of action, suddenly cried out:

"Clotilde, I have it."

"What is it, Manuel? Tell me quick," answered the maiden, who had been busying her brain in a vain endeavor to hit upon some plan to secure the Sea Monster.

"Well, a plan has flashed through my mind, which I think, with your aid will be successful."

"I will do all I can, Manuel, so tell me your plan."

"There are on board the yacht, besides the Sea Monster, four wounded pirates, and seven who are prisoners and unhurt."

"Yes, so my father said."

"Well, I wanted to rescue the whole of them; but I do not see how it can be done."

"I thought you said just now you had hit upon a plan."

"To rescue the chief, yes, but not all of them."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I think we can save him."

"But how?"

"Well, my plan is to at once take horse down the coast to the fishing fleet haven, and charter one of their vessels in which to return here with all speed."

"Well?"

"I will arrive just after dark, and report to the young captain of the Sea Owl that a Reef Pirate has attacked the fishing fleet, and can be captured if he sails at once in pursuit."

"I am still too blind to see a rescue in this, Manuel, as you certainly would not attack the Sea Owl with a fishing-smack."

"Not I, Clotilde, for I am no fool; but now comes your time to act."

"Mine!"

"Yes."

"But what am I to do?"

"Your father is the constable here?"

"Yes, as you know."

"You have access to his papers and the town seal, for he is also the magistrate?"

"Yes, Manuel."

"You could get an official paper and the seal if you wished?"

"I could."

"Now that is good, and we can arrange all satisfactorily."

"But how?"

"I will get the services of three men to act as under officers, or deputies of your father, and, armed with a written document, bearing the stamp of the town and seal, which you will procure, they must be in readiness to board the yacht when they see my fishing-smack coming up."

"The three men can do no good."

"Listen, and see if they cannot."

"I will write an order, or request, that Captain English, the Sea Monster, be sent on shore with the officers, that the town council may question him regarding a certain prominent individual whom he had captured and was holding for ransom, promising to return him on board the yacht as soon as he has given the information desired."

"I think I see your plot, Manuel."

"I shall soon make it as clear as noon-day."

"Now, as the fishing-smack arrives just as Captain Brandt has read this document, begging him to come at once after the Reef Pirates, he cannot of course go on shore with the chief, nor will he care to trust any of his men, feeling that he will need his full force, so the supposed officers will have him to guard themselves."

"As soon as they leave the yacht they will pull for the city landing; but, when the Sea Owl has gone, they will row out upon the water and go to a safe retreat, and there leave the chief."

"And you, Manuel, will not risk yourself on the smack?"

"Now, I think of it, I had best not, for the Planter Middy, as they call that boy commander, for he has a large plantation on the coast, may demand that I go with him."

"No, I'll put a crew of several of my men on the smack, and leave it to them to keep from going with the yacht, and, when the Sea Owl has sailed, they can anchor the little

craft and leave her for the fishermen to come after, as I will direct them to do."

"But you?"

"I shall play officer, Clotilde, and carry the official paper to the Planter Middy."

"No, no, for he may recognize you."

"Not in the disguise I will wear."

"Now, Clotilde, I will ride in all haste down to the fishing-grounds, and charter a smack, which I shall dispatch to a point where I will send three of my men to meet it and take charge."

"I will instruct them to come into port at such a time, and, when I sight her I will get my two allies and board the yacht."

"But now I wish an official paper, the seal and some wax."

"I have never yet done an act to compromise my father, Manuel," and the maiden hesitated.

"Your father is away, is he not?"

"Yes, he left for Pensacola several days ago."

"And will return when?"

"In a few days."

"Then what is done in his absence cannot compromise him."

"No."

"You might give his office the appearance that it had been entered forcibly, and the paper taken and seal used."

"Yes, I can do that to-night. Now wait for me here."

She left the arbor, and in twenty minutes returned with a small basket in her hands.

From it she took a roll of paper, a quill pen, ink-horn and brass seal.

Seizing the implements Manuel Benedict hastily wrote a few lines, and addressed them to

"Acting Captain

"IRVING BRANDT,

"U. S. Coast Guard Cruiser Sea Owl,

"OFF SAN AUGUSTINE."

This document he read to the maiden, and receiving her sanction to its contents, he sealed it, the wax being lighted from a taper which Clotilde had not forgotten to bring with her.

"Now, my dearest, our plot cannot miscarry."

"And when will I see you, Manuel?"

"To-morrow I will call, and in my present disguise."

"I will profess to be an old friend of your father, so that your mother will allow you to entertain me."

"Now good-by, sweetheart, and accept my heartfelt thanks for your goodness."

He embraced her affectionately, and then walked away, assuming the gait and bearing of an old man, while she murmured:

"I thank Heaven he has forgiven me! but oh! had he been dead by my act, I could not have lived."

CHAPTER XLII.

CAUGHT BY CUNNING.

MIDSHIPMAN IRVING BRANDT, acting captain of the Sea Owl, was feeling proud of his victory over the pirates.

He knew that, but for the mysterious girl, who had given him the warning, he would have lost his vessel, while he was off on a wild-goose chase after supposed pirates.

Warned by her, he had been not only able to beat off the buccaneers, but also to capture the noted sea wolf, besides saving the hangman trouble by ridding the sea of some of the red-handed outlaws.

He had gone on shore in the morning, in an effort to find the girl, but had returned unsuccessful, greatly to his disappointment, for he was anxious to show her some appreciation of her kindness.

He had failed in capturing the false lover, but sincerely hoped that he had been slain, and had sunk to a watery grave.

He felt elated at having the Sea Monster in his power, and, as he paced the deck, murmured half-aloud:

"Those I love at the old plantation will feel proud of me, and it will be a great relief to father and all at home that I have rid the sea of that red-handed man who lies in irons below decks."

"Myrtle, my darling little sweetheart, and to be some day my wife, said I would win promotion before my first cruise was over in my beautiful yacht, and I wouldn't be surprised

if capturing the Sea Monster did get me a lieutenancy, young as I am."

"Well, I'll not remain in this port long, but run down among the Bahamas to see what new adventures will turn up; but I'm half-tempted to leave the Sea Monster in the strong calabosa of the town until my return, so that I will not risk the losing of him."

"Egad! if I take him with me, and I see danger of his escaping, by some strong vessel taking my yacht, I'll hang him up first."

Thus mused the young commander as he paced his deck, while the sun was nearing the horizon.

He had just been called below, to supper, when the officer of the deck reported a shore boat alongside, with a person who desired to see the captain on important business.

"Admit him," said the midshipman, and a few minutes after a stout man, in a semi-official uniform, and with red beard and hair, entered the cabin.

He saluted the young commander politely, and said:

"I hope I don't intrude, cap'n, but I bring you a letter from our magistrate, who is also our high-sheriff, Squire Emory, and I have two deputies with me, who are now waiting on deck."

"Be seated, sir, please," and so saying, in his pleasant way, Irving Brandt broke the seal and read the official-looking document, which, it is needless to say, was the forged paper of the young sailor, who, with his form padded out, and his red hair and beard, was most completely metamorphosed from the handsome young pirate whom the midshipman had conversed with the day before, and been so nearly led into a trap by him.

"This is quite opportune, sir, I may say, and of course you know its contents?" said Brandt, after reading it.

"It is a request, sir, that the Sea Monster be sent ashore, under guard of myself and deputies, that the councilmen may ask of him certain information, as I understand it."

"Yes, and I was just thinking, this afternoon, as I intend to run off on a cruise, to ask the magistrate to take my prisoners in charge for me until my return."

"They will do it, sir, with pleasure, I am certain."

"Thank you, and I will accompany you ashore and ask it of them, at the same time carrying the other prisoners under an escort of some of my own crew."

This was different from what the sailor had expected.

He had not hoped to get all the prisoners, and he certainly did not wish Irving Brandt and some of his men to go, too, for he dared not let them visit the calabosa, as the plot he had laid would be discovered.

His only hope then was in the fishing-smack; but if that failed, he made up his mind to boldly attempt the rescue of the prisoners, come what may.

"Woods, a decanter of brandy and refreshments for the gentlemen, for, officer, you must call your men down," said the midshipman.

Benedict was growing anxious about the delay of the smack, and seized gladly upon this chance to gain time, so went on deck and called to his confederates to enter the cabin.

They well knew their danger, and were not as free-and-easy as their leader.

But they all quaffed a generous drink of brandy, Benedict the while talking constantly, and telling his young host how the town regarded his exploit of the night before, and the while hoping for the coming of the smack.

"Now, gentlemen, I will order up the prisoners, and four of my men as guards, and we will start," said Irving Brandt.

Benedict's heart almost sunk within him; but just then Henry Herbert entered hastily, with the words:

"A small craft has just arrived in port, Captain Brandt, and reports having been run in by a Reef Pirate, that is now only two leagues away robbing the fishing-fleet; and he says that, as the outlaw is crippled, you can readily capture him, for he does not suspect a vessel-of-war being in this port."

"By Heaven! but I will make the attempt."

"Officer, I will have to intrust the Sea

Monster to you, for I shall at once put to sea after the pirate."

"Mr. Herbert, get the anchor up and sail on the yacht at once, please."

"I can take all of the prisoners, sir, if you have them in irons, and the magistrate will gladly keep them for you," said the cunning Benedict, seeing his chance to rescue the men along with their chief.

"Well, if you think you can manage them I will give all in your charge, though they are a hard lot."

"But several of them are wounded, and I will have the others doubly ironed."

Benedict was as anxious to get off the yacht as was her commander to set sail after the pirate reported down the coast, and it was with a glad heart that he gave the order to let go when he had the prisoners in the boat.

As the boat swung off, the yacht was already moving, so rapidly had her crew worked.

"Well, Captain English, if I got you into a scrape I have gotten you out of it," said Benedict, as the boat was rowed shoreward.

"Benedict! By Heaven, man, I half-believed you to be a traitor!" cried the pirate chief.

"Never, captain, could I be treacherous to you."

"I was a fool to trust a woman with a part of my intention, and having set her adrift she revenged herself upon me by informing young Brandt of my plot; but she helped me in rescuing you, and I am content, for I will soon have those irons off of you and the lads," and the boat headed for the landing of the Anchor Inn.

CHAPTER XLII.

A MYSTERY OF THE SEA.

UNDER a heavy pressure of sail, the Sea Owl flew away from the port of San Augustine in the darkness.

Her young commander, little dreaming of the clever trap in which he had been caught, was thirsting for another chance to distinguish himself.

He had never heard of one of the Reef Pirates being captured, and could he manage to catch one, it would indeed be a feather in his cap.

These Reef Pirates were a nuisance along the coast, for their vessels were of exceedingly light draught, they could run in what a seaman would say was "a heavy dew," and knowing the reefs, lagoons, inlets and keys thoroughly, they could always escape capture from larger vessels.

They seldom went far out at sea, but always remained within sight of safety, and where they would pounce down upon even a large clipper ship, for they always carried a full crew, they would fly from any vessel that could show its teeth and fight.

Nothing in the merchant marine was too large for them to try to capture, and nothing among the coasters too small, for they often robbed a fishing-smack of its cargo.

Knowing well just who and what these pirates were, Irving Brandt and his crew were elated at the thought of capturing one, and the men stood at quarters ready to begin work as soon as the outlaw was sighted.

Soon the little fishing-fleet came in sight, riding quietly at anchor, their lights dancing merrily as they rocked upon the waters, stirred by a seven-knot breeze.

But there seemed no excitement in the fleet, and no stranger was visible in their midst.

This surprised the young commander, and also his officers and crew.

But, as the yacht was sighted, there was visible a stir in the little fleet.

The creaking of blocks was heard, and soon sails were visible, being spread rapidly, as though dreading a foe in the Sea Owl.

"Burn a blue light, and show our colors," ordered the young captain, and this was done.

Partly reassured by the sight of the American flag, and perhaps also realizing, that, if a foe, they could not escape, the crew made no further attempt to fly, but awaited the coming of the yacht.

"Ho, the smack!" hailed the midshipman as he drew near the first of the fleet.

"Ay, ay, sir," came the answer in gruff tones.

"Where is the Reef Pirate?"

"Hain't seen none, sir."

"What?"

"Hain't seen no Reef Pirate for days."

"Was not a pirate after your fleet just before sunset?"

"No, sir."

"This is the coast-guard cruiser Sea Owl, and one of your fleet ran into San Augustine harbor a while since and reported that a Reef Pirate was destroying your vessels."

"It hain't true, cap'n."

"Has not a smack left your fleet lately?"

"Yes, cap'n, one o' our skippers chartered his craft to a gent as was willing to pay big money for it for a while, and she stood for San Augustine."

"By the Lord Harry! but there has been some devilry in this."

"Ha! I remember the boat that carried off the prisoners, and the smack arrived about that time."

"Hard! hard down your helm!"

"Stand ready all, lads, for back to San Augustine we go," and away sped the yacht on her return to the port, to find, upon arrival, that the Sea Monster had indeed escaped; but whither gone no one could tell.

Disappointed, chagrined and swearing vengeance, Irving Brandt gave the order to again put to sea, after two days' watch had failed to unearth the escaped prisoners, and the Sea Owl was headed for her cruise among the Bahamas, her young captain hoping to redeem his misfortune by destroying some of the bands of wreckers of those islands and demolishing their false beacons.

As the Sea Owl was cruising along the coast the day she left port, a sail was sighted, and pronounced to be, from its rakish appearance, either a cruiser or a pirate.

"What do you make her, sir?" asked one of the midshipmen, as Irving Brandt's face showed that he had made some discovery through his glass, which he had had turned upon the stranger for some time.

"It is the Sea Monster's schooner, or I am greatly mistaken."

"I shall soon know though," was the answer, as the eye was kept steadily at the glass.

"What can be the reason that his schooner has been cruising without him?" asked Herbert.

"That I cannot understand, unless he intends to get a fleet under his command and become a pirate commodore."

"And intended to begin by seizing our little Sea Owl."

"But missed it."

"Well, whatever his motive, he did not carry it out, and he had a narrow escape from hanging, though he is free again, and his vessel is now doubtless going to some rendezvous to pick him up, for yonder schooner is the craft of the Sea Monster."

"Well, we need have no fear of her."

"No, and she does not seem desirous of a closer acquaintance with us, for, strange to say, she still holds on her course."

"Will you hold on as we are now headed, sir?"

"No, I shall run nearer and take as close a look as I dare, for with a good start and in this breeze, I do not fear the schooner."

"Let her fall off, helmsman, so as to get a closer view of yonder stranger."

The man at the wheel quietly obeyed the order of the boy captain, and the yacht dashed swiftly along with the wind free.

It was evident that the pirate had already sighted the Sea Owl, for sharp lookouts were always aloft over a buccaneer's deck; but there was no indication whatever on board that they had done so.

The large schooner held on her same course, and all seemed quiet upon her decks.

She was driving swiftly along, making everything possible out of the breeze then blowing, and her speed was the admiration of all on the yacht, who, true seamen, would not withhold their praise even to a pirate craft.

"I know of no vessel that can sail with the Owl, excepting yonder craft," said Irving Brandt.

Then, after awhile he remarked:

"We are within a league's distance of him, and still he shows no evidence of having seen us."

"He has no flag flying."

"No, so we will set him the example."

"Run up our colors, Mr. Herbert."

The American flag soon fluttered from the peak of the yacht, and still no response came from the pirate.

"He is changing his course, by Jove!" suddenly cried Irving Brandt, as the schooner was discovered to suddenly fall off, until, throwing the wind astern, he slung his sheets wing-and-wing, and went scudding along at a lively pace.

A cheer greeted this act of the schooner, for it was a plain case of flight on the part of the pirate.

"What can it mean?" asked one.

"He certainly could whip us in ten minutes, with his heavy armament and large crew," remarked another of the young officers.

Then Irving Brandt said:

"The Sea Monster is not on board, you remember, gentlemen, and the officer in charge does not wish to risk a combat even with our little craft; but he need not run, for I had no idea of being so foolhardy as to fight him, and should have kept well out of his way."

All the glasses in the yacht were now turned upon the flying pirate.

He had not increased his sail, but was certainly anxious to get away, if he was not playing some trick.

Two men were seen at the wheel, and several forms were standing near, evidently officers.

Forward the crew were visible, and there seemed to be a large number of men on board.

"Give him a shot from the bow gun!" suddenly called out Irving Brandt, and then added:

"We'll see if we cannot make him show his sable flag."

The gun was quickly loaded and discharged, and the shot, well-aimed, struck near the stern and sent the spray in a shower upon the pirates' cheeks.

But no answering shot came.

"The men have not gone to quarters," said Brandt.

"Nor does he show his colors," said Herbert.

"Fire again, then!"

Again the gun was fired, and the iron messenger cut through the mainsail, as it was swung out to starboard.

A cheer came from the yacht's crew.

Still no response from the pirate.

"Spread more sail on the yacht, lads, for as long as he runs from us we can afford to be brave," called out the boy commander.

The topsails were set, and under the increased sail the yacht began to gain on the schooner, where before it had simply been holding its own.

Then the pirate was seen to suddenly change his course.

"Stand ready, all, to about ship; he is going about, and it is our time to run," called out Midshipman Brandt, and the yacht had almost gone round, as though on a pivot, when it was seen that the schooner did not intend to give chase, but had, from running dead before the wind, hauled her sheets well aft, and darted away on a starboard tack.

At the same time she set every stitch of canvas that would draw, and, in spite of the speed of the Sea Owl, began to slowly gain on her.

"Well, this is remarkable," said Herbert.

"Yes, it is a mystery I cannot understand," responded Irving Brandt, as he watched the pirate, with her heavy guns and large crew, and which he was no match for in the slightest sense, slowly drop the Sea Owl astern, though very slowly, for, in spite of the rough waters, the little yacht was hard to shake off, and when night came on, after hours spent in the chase, the buccaneer craft had not gained a mile to her credit.

But with the night the vessels were no longer visible to each other, and the mystery of the pirates' flight from him remained unsolved to Irving Brandt and his crew.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SKELETON'S WARNING.

THE reader will remember that we left Lita, the Girl Wrecker, standing alone upon the Death Rock, after the departure of her adopted parents and their son, in their little vessel.

The Water Wolves had agents in Havana

for the sale of the booty obtained in their murderous and nefarious practice, and these goods would be carried two or three times a year to the principal seaports and disposed of for the highest prices that could be obtained.

The little vessels, with their cargoes, which had cost so many lives, were wont to enter port as honest coasters, the Government officials little dreaming what they carried beneath their outer loads of lumber, grain or merchandise, as was most convenient to use as a "blind."

Receiving his pay, Wambold, the Water Wolf would return with it to his island home, and add it to the treasure he was rapidly enlarging by his cruel work.

It was upon an expedition of this kind that the little wrecker craft had sailed, when Lita was left alone.

The wife had not gone before, being always content to remain on shore with Lita; but she had received a nervous shock, at the sight of the ghost craft running into their port and bearing the two coffins, that caused her to feel so much dread to be parted from her husband.

The duties devolving upon the Girl Wrecker, in the absence of her companions, she well knew.

She was to watch the Death's Head Beacon closely, so that no vessel could appear in those dangerous waters, without being lured to destruction.

She had, of course, to cook her own food, and to look after the chickens and cows, for there were domestic fowls and cattle on the island, which had been received alive from wrecks.

After attending to these duties, Lita had the remainder of her time to herself.

She was no coward and did not fear to be alone, though when the wind moaned through the pines at night, and the waves fell with ominous sound upon the beach, she threw more light wood on the fire in the cabin and petted the cat, glad of its company at least.

"I fear we are going to have bad weather for some days," she said, as she retired for the night, after putting a couple of logs on the fire that its light should not desert her.

In the morning she found the skies overcast, and going to the point of lookout on the cliff started as she beheld a vessel in the offing.

It was a small craft and painted white, hull, spars and all.

Its course lay from the Death Rock, which indicated that it had been nearer that dangerous place.

"That craft need have no fears, for it is the little phantom that ran in here that night," she muttered, recognizing the little vessel.

After awhile she added:

"I did not expect to see a ghost craft by daylight; but there she is, and there stands that same form in black at the helm."

"See! how she rounded Spear Head Reef, and avoided the Caldron Channel, as no one but father Wambold, Leo, myself, or a ghost craft could do; for the Phantom Pirate even dares not take that channel."

"I wonder if the ghost craft came into the basin last night."

"I hope it did not leave coffins for Leo and myself, for we are young and only the old, it seems to me, should die."

"I will go down and see."

So saying the young girl descended from the cliff to the beach of the basin, and she started back at what her eyes beheld there.

There, just in the act of emerging from the waters, were two forms.

But such forms!

They were skeletons!

White as snow, every bone in place, and riveted together as firmly as in life with flesh, sinew and blood covering them, the two skeletons appeared to have halted, while springing from a boat to the shore.

Such was their position, while one bony hand of each was outstretched and the fingers grasped a piece of paper.

Lita was fairly horrified.

The appearance of the skeleton forms was so lifelike, and their posture that of walking.

Their sightless gaze seemed to be fixed upon her in spite of the eyeless sockets, and their look seemed to plead with her to

take from their bony fingers the piece of paper.

At first she seemed about to turn and fly in dread.

But conquering this intention, she stood her ground and gazed upon them.

Then she advanced a few steps nearer.

Again she advanced, and she saw that their feet were so set in the sand as to uphold them.

Nearer she drew, and saw that the one was taller than the other, the hand of the larger grasping that of the smaller as though to lead her.

Taking the paper, held in the right hand of the larger form, and shuddering as she did so, she read, written in what appeared to be red ink:

"Alfred Wambold, I come as a warning, that you may see that your fate shall be what mine now is *within the year!*"

There was no signature, and Lita read the paper twice over.

Then she replaced it in the fingers as before, and took from the left hand, also outstretched, of the smaller skeleton, the paper it held.

This she also read aloud, and it was as follows:

"Mabel Wambold, I come as a warning, that you may see that your fate shall be what mine now is *within two years!*"

"Well, this is fearful!" cried Lita, as she replaced the paper in the hand from which she had taken it, as she had done before.

"Mother Wambold is given a year longer to live, by this, than is father.

"Of Leo and myself nothing is said, so we are not included.

"Oh, but won't these two be scared out of their wits!

"The coffins nearly caused them to have fits, but these skeletons will just be too much for them.

"And if they die, I wonder if Leo will live on here?

"I wish I could go away; but I know not where to go or what to do, and I have read in books that young girls do not get on well in the world without friends and if left alone.

"But I don't like it here, and if mother and father die I will not allow Leo to make me light that horrid beacon any more, and when he goes to sell the booty I will make him take me, so I can see something of the world away from this old island of rocks.

"Now, I will go to the cliff and see if I can catch sight of the ghost craft, that I know left those skeletons here."

She had been away from the cliff for a couple of hours, by the time she returned, and when she got back the ghost craft was nowhere in sight.

But another vessel was, and it had come to anchor a mile from the rock, evidently not caring to run through the rock and reef-dotted waters, with the sea growing rougher and the wind rising to half a gale.

"Oh, Heaven have mercy! there is another vessel doomed to destruction, and it is a war-craft, too," cried the Girl Wrecker, as her eyes fell upon the little vessel.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE TREACHEROUS PILOT.

THE vessel which Lita, the Girl Wrecker had discovered, anchored off the island, was indeed a vessel-of-war, and one which the reader has before seen, for it was the Sea Owl.

The young commander of the armed yacht, had cruised boldly among the islands, and in several instances rendered good service to merchant vessels.

From the crews of these vessels he had heard most fearful stories of the doings of wreckers among the Bahamas, and awed by their superstition, the seamen had furthermore stated that in the most dangerous channels was to be seen by night the Phantom Pirate.

This craft was represented as a schooner sailing with the speed of a gale, with hull, masts and sails as black as ink, and to see her was certain death to honest sailors and destruction to their vessels.

Another story was also told of a ghost craft seen among the Bahamas.

This other weird vessel was a small schooner, with hull, sails and spars as white as snow, but with a woman in black at the

helm, and those who had seen her close asserted on oath that she had a fleshless face, that is a skull instead of a head that was full of life.

A third yarn was also spun, and in the mysterious tones of those who believe what they say.

This was to the effect that a Death's Head Beacon was lighted on stormy nights, on one of the islands, and that the crew of a vessel once beholding this lurid light, had no power to steer clear of it, but rushed to ruin directly upon it.

In the neighborhood of this Death's Head Beacon, the Phantom Pirate, or Black Phantom, was often seen, as was also the little schooner or ghost craft.

The Phantom Pirate and the Death's Head Beacon, Irving Brandt and his crew had heard of before; but the ghost craft was a new mystery of the sea to them.

To solve these mysteries the boy captain was determined, and he had a private conference with his two young officers, who, just as full of daring as their commander, said they would join him in any enterprise he cared to lead.

Then the old boatswain and the quarter-masters were consulted by Irving Brandt, and they shook their heads ominously, but said that their duty was to obey orders and where he led they would go.

The crew slightly demurred, but they had full confidence in their young captain and were willing to follow his lead.

If he was willing to risk his life in endeavoring to solve the supernatural, they could not refuse to offer theirs as a sacrifice if he asked it.

Under ordinary circumstances, Irving Brandt was not one to ask his officers and crew what he should and should not do; but this intended cruise against what men believed to be allied to Satan was out of the usual run, and he wished to know the feelings of all on board regarding the undertaking.

Backed up as he was by his officers, and men, too, so far as no remonstrance from the latter came, he at once headed for the cruising-ground of the Phantom Pirate and Ghost Craft and the vicinity of the Death Rock, on which the Skull Beacon was said to have been seen.

Obtaining a Bahama pilot he felt his way cautiously here and there, and it was his good fortune to find upon two islands a false beacon, attended by several villainous-looking wreckers.

One of these was upon Abaco; and upon discovering it by night, instead of following its false rays he came to anchor, took its bearings, and went in his boats to the island and surprised the wreckers, and quickly made them prisoners.

The second false beacon was discovered, and the wreckers caught in much the same way; and as quantities of booty from wrecks had been found, with several small sloops, the men were considerably elated over their good luck.

The booty and small vessels were hidden away among the islands to await the return of the yacht, the prisoners being heavily ironed and left in charge of a coxswain and two of the Sea Owl's men.

Cruising on among the islands, feeling his way cautiously and slowly, the daring young officer went, until one morning he found himself in the vicinity of the Death Rock.

The Bahama pilot—a Spaniard—had given orders just how to steer, as dawn was breaking, and said they could call him in three hours, as he would turn in for that time.

Then, as was supposed, he went below.

But, when Irving Brandt came on deck and glanced about him, he fairly started at the sight.

The sky was overcast with threatening clouds, the sea was rough, and in many spots about were seen reefs, and the ragged heads of rocks rising above the waters.

It was no pleasant predicament for the young commander to find himself in, and he hastily called for the Bahama pilot.

"He has turned in, sir," was the response.

"Rouse him at once, for he has gone wrong here, that is certain."

The man went below to order the pilot on deck, but soon returned with the information:

"He cannot be found, sir."

"What?"

The startling information was repeated, and then a thorough search of the yacht followed.

What could it mean?

No one could answer this question.

Then the bunk of the pilot was searched, and it was found that he had taken his little bundle with him.

This looked suspicious.

It seemed as though he had gone of his free accord.

The yacht's presence in such an undesirable locality, and the pilot being gone, disappearing in the early dawn, seemed a sure indication that the fellow had deserted.

"Did we pass near any islands about dawn?" asked Irving Brandt, who had passed nearly the whole night on deck with the pilot.

"Yes, sir, we sailed almost around a large island, and were at times not half a mile from it," answered the officer of the deck.

"Then he has deserted, after leading us into this dangerous location, and the story is true, that the Bahama pilots are a treacherous lot, and many of them, doubtless, are allies of the wreckers.

"But to get out of this scrape as best we can."

Then every endeavor was made to find a channel out of the rock-bound bay in which they were; but there were sunken reefs and rock-islands on all sides, and with the wind increasing, Irving Brandt ordered the anchors let fall, hoping to ride out the blow there, and with calm water be able to tow the yacht out of her danger.

But all through the day the wind continued to rise, and at night was blowing a gale, while the anchors, it was found, were dragging at every lurch of the yacht, and not a mile astern of her was a white wall of foam, denoting that the waters there broke upon a ragged reef.

Thus, with her anchors dragging, and a gale blowing, night settled down upon the gallant little Sea Owl, while few on board expected to see the light of another day.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE GIRL WRECKER'S RESOLVE.

LITA was really distressed, when she beheld the yacht lying in her dangerous position.

She had never voluntarily sinned against unfortunate mariners, and though doing so by order of Wambold, the Water Wolf, felt an innate consciousness of wrong-doing.

She naturally shuddered at causing enemies, as she was taught all who sailed in ships were to the Water Wolves, to rush headlong to destruction; but, whenever she had said she did not think it right to lure them to death, she had been laughed at, and argument had been used, from Wambold's stand-point, to convince her that it was right.

Now that she saw the beautiful yacht lying amid the reefs, she began to think more deeply upon the subject than ever before.

She gazed at the little vessel, examining her fine points with the eye of a sailor, and murmured:

"It would be a shame even to destroy so beautiful a vessel, let alone those who are upon her."

The uniforms of the young officers caught her eye too, and seizing her glass, a powerful one, she sought her place of concealment and turned it upon the Sea Owl.

Thus she had almost a near view of the faces of the officers and men.

She saw them anxiously watching their surroundings and was assured that they knew well their danger.

It was late in the afternoon before she went to the cabin to cook her dinner, and hastening through her meal she returned to the cliff.

In the hour, or more, she had been absent the wind had increased in violence, and the sea was more rough.

The Sea Owl still lay at anchor, but was tugging hard at her chains, as though anxious to sever them and fly away to a haven of safety.

The crew of the yacht were doubtless all upon deck, and they still eyed their surroundings ominously.

The anchors were both out, the sails

furled, and all made necessary to ride out the night as best they could.

But the anchors were dragging every time the schooner's bows were tossed higher than usual, and Lita knew that she must go upon the reef astern, or get under way.

If the latter, where could she head, for there were but two channels in that wild sweep of water around them and but five persons could pilot a vessel through those.

One of those was Wambold, the Water Wolf, another was herself, a third was Leo the young wrecker, and the other two were at that time absent from the Bahamas.

"No, there is one more," she said huskily, as her mind swept over the pilots of the Death Rock Reefs.

"And that is the one who stands at the helm of the ghost craft," and she slightly shuddered as she remembered the coffins and glanced down toward where the two skeletons were on the beach of the basin, where she had determined to leave them to await the return of the Water Wolves.

As night drew near, Lita became nervous.

She saw that the storm was rising, and furthermore she knew that the little vessel would be lost, even did she not light the beacon.

The idea had been instilled into her mind, that, when the beacon was lighted, crews of vessels were unable to steer in any other direction than toward it.

With superstition ruling that age, she naturally believed what was told her of the supernatural.

But, without the lurid rays of the ghastly Death's Head Beacon, she felt that the yacht must go down.

If it remained at anchor it would be driven upon the reefs.

If it got under way then it would surely dash upon some rock in the darkness.

She had never had the uninterrupted chance to observe a vessel off the island as she had that one, and she became more and more interested in it the more she looked upon it.

She was more than delighted with its symmetry, and quite won over by its dashing officers and crew.

Thus she became more and more anxious as night came on.

"I will feel like standing by and seeing friends die," she said after awhile.

Then as the shadows grew deeper and deeper, the waves became larger and more furious and the winds more vicious, she suddenly cried:

"I will not let that craft go down.

"Father, mother, nor Leo are here to see me, and I will save her, nor then bid them go far from here and never return.

"Ah! what would father not do if he knew what I have resolved to do?

"But I'll keep the secret to myself, and he can never know it."

With this resolve she arose to her feet, just as darkness fell upon sea and shore, and descending the ladder, over the point of the cliff, soon stood upon the rocky shelf whereon rested the Death's Head Beacon.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

IRVING BRANDT fully realized the danger into which he had run his vessel.

He saw that, with the wind as it was, he could not retrace his way as he had come.

Were it a pleasant day, with a very light breeze and placid sea, he could, sailing slowly along, avoid dangers as other vessels had done, for he could, from the mast-head, readily distinguish the sunken rocks and reefs.

But with half a gale blowing, and steadily increasing, with no machine to show depths of water, and surrounded by rocky barriers, he well knew his chances were almost desperate.

As night came on he saw that his anchors were dragging more rapidly, under the greater force of the wind and waves.

He calculated the time that it would take the yacht to drive stern-foremost upon the reef, and set it down at about two hours.

After an hour he would get up his anchors and, under what sail the yacht would work under, endeavor to stand off and on within a given space, and thus avoid the rocks as best he could.

With the currents that must set strongly there, he knew this would be most hazardous work; but it was all that could be done, and desperate emergencies required desperate measures.

His eyes had frequently swept over the barren face of the Death Rock, with no thought that it held any inhabitants.

So well was the Death's Head Beacon concealed by its canvas curtain, that his glass had failed to detect the break in the wall wherein was placed the hideous lantern.

That an opening, large enough for a ship to pass through, was in that solid wall of rock, not one on board the yacht could have been made to believe.

Here, there, upon all sides, were smaller islands, or rocks, in great number; but all were barren and inhospitable, and seemed devoid of any approach through the reefs surrounding them.

With such a prospect before them, it will not be surprising to know that the crew of the Sea Owl from the daring young captain down, were in a state of deep suspense and dread when night fell about them, shutting in the dangers from view.

But the roar of the dashing waves, the howling of the winds, the clanking of the iron cables, and pitching of the yacht were present with them to remind them of what they had to face in the gloom of night.

With brave mien and in silence they waited, watching the shadows deepen about them.

The more superstitious of the crew felt that their predicament was brought on by their daring to approach the cruising-ground of the Phantom Pirate, and if any seaman held out hope of getting through in safety, they shook their heads ominously.

In silence Irving Brandt paced the quarter-deck.

He felt sorry that he had run his vessel and crew into such danger; but he knew that he had acted for the best, and did not bewail his fate.

If death came he would meet it bravely; but it was hard, oh! so hard, for him to leave the world just as his career was beginning with such hopes and brilliancy.

"Ho, forward there!"

The men started, as the voice of their young commander rung above the storm.

"Ay, ay, sir," rang out the watch in chorus.

"Stand ready to raise that anchor, for I do not like the roar of the waters on yonder reef.

"We are getting too near it."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"I shall go to the foretop myself, Herbert, and direct the course to steer, for I studied the open water, and courses I should have to keep, all the afternoon, and there must be no hesitancy in obeying my orders," said the Planter Midshipman.

"There shall not be, sir— Great God! see there!"

The cry came from the lips of Henry Herbert, and a murmur, that was almost a groan, came from the crew.

"The Death's Head Beacon!" said Irving Brandt as he turned in the direction that all eyes were now gazing.

"The Death's Head Beacon!" echoed the two under officers who stood near.

"The Death's Head Beacon of the Bahamas!" came from the men who were now grouped amidships.

It was an appalling sight.

The winds howled through the rigging, the waves ran high and furiously, the yacht plunged wildly and tugged viciously at her anchors, while there, coming from the darkness above, for the Death Rock was hardly visible, was that weird, ghastly light.

It was a huge, perfect human head, with the lurid rays shooting out of the sockets, and a glare coming from between the grinning teeth.

Then about the head, or seeming giant skull, hovered a misty light, or halo, which showed it off in all its appallingness.

As though looking upon the yacht, its rays fell almost upon the decks, and many of the men hid their eyes from the sight.

But the young commander seemed not awed at the sight, but gazed upon it in a steady, practical way, as though striving to solve the mystery and thoroughly convinced

that there was trickery of some kind at the bottom of the spectral light.

"That is the beacon of which we have heard so much, and I would give the yacht to find out just what it is," said Irving Brandt, quietly.

After looking for some time longer at the weird light, and examining it closely with his glass, he turned to look to the safety of his vessel, which was still slowly but steadily dragging her anchors.

"We must make sail, Herbert, and begin standing off and on, for we are getting dangerously near yonder reef."

"We are, indeed, Irving," said Herbert, calmly.

"I, for one, am very glad yonder Death's Head Lighthouse has loomed up, and am much obliged to the lighter, be he man, ghost or devil," said Irving Brandt, and he again looked toward the beacon.

"Glad?"

"Yes, Herbert."

"May I ask why?"

"Because it will give me a correct bearing to steer by."

"It is said to be fatal to go by yonder light."

"It may be, to go toward it or be guided by it; but it is stationary, and that gives me a correct bearing."

"It will be risky."

"It will be far more so not to have some point, so I shall make use of it, if it is the Evil Eye."

Herbert shook his head but made no reply, and then the young captain sung out clearly:

"Lively, lads, lively, for this is no time for laggards!"

The men sprung to their work, but all paused suddenly, as though struck motionless.

And each man stood in the attitude of listening.

Loud roared the waves, viciously whistled the winds, and no other sound was heard.

But still all stood in silence, almost like statues.

"Schooner ahoy!"

The voice seemed to come from the black waters.

The voice was clear, ringing and musical.

Every man seemed dazed, and glanced toward Irving Brandt as though they felt that it was a spirit voice and wished to see what he would do.

"Ahoy! ahoy!" sung out the midshipman loudly, and he sprung upon the starboard bulwarks and clung to the ratlines.

"Throw me a rope as I come up astern."

It was the same voice, and the men straining their eyes, tried to see who it was out upon the black waters in that wild sea.

That it must be a spirit, hailing them to wreck them, they all believed, and even the two under officers were of the same opinion.

But Irving Brandt answered in firm tones:

"Ay, ay, come up under the lee of the stern, and I will cast you a rope."

Then ordering several lines brought him, he took his stand aft and gazed down into the dark waters.

Soon an object came in sight, heading directly for the yacht's stern, and urged on by a pair of oars.

"Cast!" called out the occupant of the boat.

In obedience Irving cast the line, and it was caught cleverly and made fast.

Then the one in the boat cried out, the voice rising above the roar of the storm:

"Throw another line, please, and I will board you."

A second line was thrown and skillfully caught, and with marvelous agility the daring occupant of the boat boarded the yacht.

It was Lita, the Girl Wrecker.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE GIRL PILOT.

HAD a spirit indeed boarded the Sea Owl, her crew would not have been more amazed than were they at seeing the one who did suddenly appear in their midst.

Lita, as I have said, possessed a lovely face and perfect form.

Her eyes were large and full of beauty, while her hair hung in wet masses about her, falling down to her knees.

She was dressed in a costume that a young princess might have worn, for its richness, and yet her little brown feet were bare.

Her fingers glittered with rings studded with rubies, emeralds and diamonds, and she wore a necklace of precious stones.

"Who are you?" asked Irving Brandt, caught wholly off his guard for once, and seemingly dazed by her appearance.

"I am Lita," was the innocent reply.

"Lita?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask how it is you are out in such a storm?" and Irving hardly knew what to say.

"Oh! I have been out in worse; but this is a bad one for you to be caught here in, and I came out to save your vessel and crew, for I don't like to see men drown; their cries for help haunt me sometimes."

"I should think so; but do you hear such cries often?"

"Oh, yes, very often."

"Where did you come from?"

"My home."

"Is it possible you live in one of these islands?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know these waters?"

"Oh, yes, I know every rock and reef."

"And can pilot us to a place where we can ride out the blow?"

"Yes, sir."

"God bless you, my sweet girl, for those words; but tell me, whither can we go to safety, for I saw only rock-dotted waters around us by day."

"Yes, these are deadly waters for vessels to sail in; but I can save your pretty craft, only you must make me some promises first."

"Gladly."

"You must promise not to tell on me, or to come again to the island."

"I will promise you, certainly."

"Nor will you allow your men to harm me or our home?"

"By no means shall they, and, owing you their lives as they will, gladly will they promise for themselves."

"You are our enemies, for father and mother and Leo told me so, and I should let your vessel be wrecked and see you all die; but I will not, and only hope you will not cause me to regret saving you."

She spoke with such perfect innocence she impressed all deeply, for the crew had gathered close around her, gazing upon her as the cabin lights shone through the companionway full upon her.

"My dear young lady, I would rather die than cause you harm; but you must not think us your enemies, but your friends."

"All vessels carry our foes, sir, except the Phantom Pirate, father says."

"Hail you are from the Wrecker's Island?"

"We are Water Wolves, sir; father says men call us so."

All started at this frank confession, and Irving Brandt said earnestly:

"Well, whatever men may call those whom you are with, you can never be termed a Water Wolf, I will swear; but see, are we not dragging too near down upon yonder reef?" and he pointed to the reef, not a cable's length astern.

"Yes, sir; get sail on the schooner and I will take the wheel," she said quietly.

"And I will aid you," and orders were at once issued to get up the anchors and set the mainsail and jib, reefed down.

With quickness and skill these orders were obeyed, and, the irons leaving the bottom, the yacht moved swiftly away from the dangerous rocks astern.

Lita had taken her stand by the wheel, and Irving Brandt himself stepped to her assistance, saying:

"Can you manage a vessel, miss?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"And you know what course to take in such a black night?"

"Of course I do, sir, or I could not save your vessel."

That seemed plausible, and Irving again asked:

"Do you know aught of yonder hideous light?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is it?"

"At Death Rock, sir."

"Ah! I thought that rock habitable to a bird only."

The girl made no reply, and kept her eyes riveted ahead.

"Port, sharp, sir!" she suddenly said.

"Port 'tis," responded the midshipman.

"Hard down, hard!" and her voice fairly rung.

"Hard down 'tis," responded the middy, and the yacht minded her helm beautifully.

"You are heading directly for the Death's Head Beacon," suddenly said Irving, as the sharp bowsprit of the Sea Owl was pointed toward the hideous skull.

"Yes, that is the way I must steer from this point to pass through."

"Pass through what?"

"The reef."

"Ah! you intend to pass through a reef, then?"

"Yes, sir, and the opening is little wider than this vessel, so do not talk to me, please."

The boy captain took the hint and remained silent, while the crew, in breathless suspense, watched every movement of the girl pilot.

Around them were ragged rocks, before them loomed up the island, and almost over the decks now shone down the skull beacon.

"Great God! we seem dashing directly upon yonder wall of rock," said Midshipman Herbert, hoarsely.

"Yes, we seem so, but we are not."

"See, we are passing through the reef now," calmly answered Lita, and the yacht's deck was almost flooded with spray, while she bounded on with terrific speed.

Then, in a voice that rung like bars against the wall of the island, she cried:

"Hard up! hard up your helm!"

"Hard up 'tis," came in the quiet tones of the boy captain, and the yacht's course was quickly changed.

"Let her fall off sharp!" was the next order, and, just as the crew expected to see the yacht shiver her bows against the rock, her falling off was checked, and she darted into the narrow passage leading to the basin.

The wheel to port and starboard once or twice, and the Sea Owl emerged into the quiet basin, while one long, loud cheer burst from the crew.

"Drop your anchor here, sir, please."

The request was obeyed and the yacht rode quietly at anchor, for the wild storm without did not reach into that sheltered bowl.

"Now, sir, I will leave you; but I shall come off in the morning to pilot you out to sea."

"Thank you, miss, and God bless you for saving the lives of us all."

"I like to have you say God bless me, for the books say that good people talk that way, and I know that you will not be wicked toward me; but I will go ashore now, and, please, sir, do not let your men land."

"Nor can I?"

"No, sir, for I do not wish it."

"Your wishes shall be respected; but will not the Water Wolves board our vessel?"

"There is no one on the island now, sir, but myself."

"Indeed! are you alone on this fearful island?"

"Yes, sir, and I must get your vessel to sea again to-morrow, for if the sloop came back and found you here, father would kill me."

Irving made no reply, and her little boat, which had been dragged astern through the wild waters, was quickly drawn alongside, and into it she sprung and seizing the oars, pulled rapidly shoreward, followed by many a fervent "God bless you" from the crew she had saved by her daring and skill as a pilot, girl though she was.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE PHANTOM AND THE REALITY.

It was the night after the running into the basin of the Sea Owl, and still the yacht lay at anchor in the little harbor.

The day had been stormy, and Irving Brandt would not allow Lita to pilot them to sea, when he knew that she had to return alone over the wild waters.

She laughed at his fears; but he told her

that the two days of storm had made the waves rougher than even a tornado would have done, and he would not hear of her risking her life to save his vessel and crew.

"To-morrow will doubtless be a pleasant day, and then we will run out," he had said to her when she came aboard in the morning to act as pilot.

She was compelled to acquiesce, and did so with good grace.

The fact is she was drawn toward those whom she had been taught to look upon as foes, in a manner that was new to her.

She knew that, in the blow, Wambold would not attempt to return, and she felt safe on that score, while she really felt anxious to keep the yacht in the basin, as she took great pleasure in the company of those whom she had saved from death.

By questioning her, in a way not to alarm her fears, Irving Brandt found out from her how she had been cast upon the island in a wreck, and was not the child of those whom she called father and mother.

He also learned that Wambold, his wife and son had been on a dismasted vessel, which had driven right into the basin in a storm, and that there they had lived ever since, carrying on their diabolical practice of destroying every vessel that sailed in the waters with one exception.

"And that one?" asked the young officer.

"Is the Phantom Pirate."

"Ah!"

"That craft he cannot destroy," said the Girl Wrecker.

Having learned from the girl all that he could of interest, Brandt began to quietly open her eyes to the outer world.

He told her of right and wrong, and of the enormity of the crimes committed by the Water Wolves.

Not to alarm or distress her, he did not condemn her, but those whom she was forced to obey.

He explained to her that all nations punished wreckers, such as was Wambold, the Water Wolf, with death, and begged her to let him remain there to capture them upon their return, promising her that she should have a home with his sister at the Brandt Plantation, and they would do all they could to find out her parents for her.

The young girl began to see life as it was in reality, and not as painted by Wambold and his wife; but she would consent to his remaining only on condition that, after breaking up the wreckers' haunt, he would allow Wambold, his wife and Leo to go free.

This Irving Brandt was forced to agree to, and felt delighted in having at least been able to break up the Water Wolves' home and destroy the false beacon.

"Now, will you permit me to go ashore with you and show me the mystery of the Skull Beacon?" he asked.

"Yes; I will show you all, for your words tell me that I have done very wrong," she answered frankly.

Going ashore, the pretty wrecker showed the cabins of the Water Wolves, pointed out the cows grazing up the vale, the chickens picking along the hillsides, and other evidences that the wreckers took their comfort, which might, in that lone spot, be termed luxuries.

The young midshipman gazed upon all with deep interest, and then Lita led the way up to the cliff, and then along it to the false beacon.

"Well, this is a remarkable island," said Irving Brandt, as he gazed at the valley, surrounded by steep hillsides, the little harbor, or basin, overhung by lofty cliffs, the pass out to the sea, and the precipitous points on all sides that faced the waters.

In the basin lay his yacht at anchor, those on board gazing up at him as he stood on a point of rock surveying the scene.

"Will you come down to the light?" asked Lita.

"Yes."

She swung herself over with a recklessness which he dared not attempt to equal, cool-headed as he was, and descended to the shelf upon which rested the huge skull.

He saw the wall of canvas that concealed it from view, and examined it intently.

The winds whirled savagely about them, and the spot was by no means a pleasant one to remain in, so they soon returned to the cliff above.

"Sail ho!" suddenly cried Irving, glancing out over the wind-lashed waters, and, in the gathering gloom catching sight of a sail.

One glance at it, and the girl returned to the Skull Beacon for her glass.

"It is the Phantom Pirate," she called out,

"Ha! and he coming this way?"

"I shall soon know, sir."

A few moments of silence, and then Lita called out:

"Yes, he rounds the Spear Head Rock and jibes to starboard; he is coming here, and there goes his signal for the beacon."

A moment after the lantern was lighted, and the canvas wall rolled up, which sent the lurid glare out over the darkening waters.

Then up to the cliff went the girl and joined Irving Brandt, who was impatiently awaiting her coming.

"Lita, what is that vessel?" he asked.

"The Phantom Pirate."

"That you told me before; but the Phantom Pirate is a craft that cruises in these waters, leading honest vessels to destruction."

"She has been seen off the Florida coast, and has a speed that has prevented her capture."

"I never saw the craft, but I have heard she carries full sail in a blow, and is a weird craft."

"See! she is plainly visible now."

Suddenly in the gloom of approaching night, as the Girl Wrecker spoke, over the coming vessel a strange glare fell, and the hull and rigging were visible, but as though through a misty light.

Irving Brandt thus had a good look at the strange craft.

It was a trim-built schooner, painted black, with rigging and sails of the same sable hue.

She had a spirit-like crew upon her decks, and glided through the waters with apparently sail enough set, in that blow, to run under a frigate.

There was certainly something very uncanny about her, and this the midshipman was forced to admit.

"Is she coming into this harbor, Lita?"

"Yes."

"She has been here before, then?"

"Yes, but I have never seen her there, or closer than yonder reef."

"Lita."

"Sir?"

"I shall attack yonder craft, if the devil is her commander and imps his crew."

"You remain here, and signal to me with your small lantern when she enters the pass into the island."

She would have remonstrated with him, but he had already gone.

Down the ladder to the valley and thence to the beach he ran.

A boat was upon the shore, and springing into it, he rowed rapidly out to the yacht.

"All hands ahoy!" he cried, in a way that told the crew something had happened, or was about to happen, out of the usual run.

The men sprung at his call, and then came the order:

"Put the schooner under close-reefed mainsail, foresail and jib!"

This was quickly done.

"Now, lads, up with that anchor!"

The order was promptly obeyed, though the men wondered what their young commander intended to do.

"Now to quarters, lads, and double-shot your guns."

"Have your boarding-pikes, pistols and cutlasses ready, and stand ready for action at close quarters, for there is a pirate schooner coming into this basin and we have got to fight her to the bitter end."

The crew gave a cheer, and the schooner stood away from her anchorage, ready for action.

CHAPTER XLIX.

FIGHTING A PHANTOM.

"Ha! there is the signal!" cried Irving, as the yacht put about for the tenth time in her short tacks across the basin.

The wind came in savage gusts over the high cliffs, causing the Sea Owl, even under her reefed sails, to lay well over under its

pressure, and the waters were uneasy and surging with the influence from without, though there were no rough waves.

The night was dark, and the storm roared loudly, but the men felt that the schooner was safe within that walled basin.

The crew stood at quarters, and the guns were double-shot with grape, while the small-arms were ready and at hand.

What they had to face the men did not exactly know, other than that the words of their young captain had said it was a pirate, and implied that it would be a fight to the bitter end.

That it was the Phantom Pirate, Irving Brandt had taken good care to keep from even his brother officers.

At his cry regarding the signal, he was walking up at the cliff, and had seen the lantern wave thrice in a circle by Lita.

It told him that the Phantom Pirate was entering the pass.

Instantly he ordered the helmsman to hug the wall of the basin close, so as to dart out from its shelter, and lay alongside of the Phantom the moment it shot through the pass into the basin.

The gun amidships and the pivots were all pointed to port, and the crew was ordered to stand ready to let fall the anchors and lower sail, so that the two vessels would have to come to a stop.

What crew the Pirate Phantom had, Irving Brandt could only surmise, and he did not doubt but that he would be outnumbered.

But his surprise, and first volley, would put them on equal footing, he was assured, if the craft was a reality, and if a phantom as was said, then no effort of his could subdue it.

Again the lantern on the cliff swung in a circle, and then came the words from the midshipman commander:

"Ready, lads! Port a little, there at the wheel!"

The next moment a strange light seemed to drive into the basin, and a schooner shot out of the pass into full view.

"Fire! and lay her alongside!" shouted Irving Brandt, without giving his crew time to get demoralized.

The yacht shook under the discharge, and the crashing of timber, and shrieks, groans, curses, and a cheer from the Sea Owls followed.

"Our Phantom Pirate is wood, flesh and blood, lads."

"Lay alongside, helmsman!" cried Irving Brandt, and, under cover of a fusillade of small-arms the yacht struck the Phantom Pirate.

The shock threw many to the decks; but the grapnels were thrown, the anchors let fall, the sails came down with a run, and with wild cheers the Sea Owls boarded the weird craft, and drove her panic-stricken crew like frightened sheep before them.

Many of the phantoms ran below, some sprung overboard, but the greater number lay dead, dying and wounded upon their vessel's decks.

They outnumbered the Sea Owl, that was evident, but they had been so surprised that they had not fired a heavy gun, and but few had attempted to defend themselves with small-arms.

The weird light, shining through colored lanterns, stationed at different places along the bulwarks, gave a view of all, and the Sea Owls saw that although appearing to run under full sail, it was an ingenious contrivance of false sails to deceive the eye while in reality only the mainsail and jib, close-reefed, were set.

The captain of the Black Phantom, as the pirate was also called, was killed at the first discharge, and the crew were glad enough to save their lives by crying for quarter, which Irving Brandt commanded his men to show them.

"Well, lads, this cruise will turn out well for us, if we did lose the giant Sea Monster," said Irving Brandt, when the Black Phantom had been secured, and the yacht's surgeon had taken the wounded in charge.

A cheer answered his words, and Henry Herbert said:

"Captain Brandt, I shall never more believe in superstition, for you have solved the mysteries of the supernatural most thoroughly."

CHAPTER L.

THE GHOST CRAFT'S PRIZE.

It was the day after the capture of the Phantom Pirate.

The crew of the yacht were busy repairing the damages caused by the fire, to the bulwarks and rigging of the vessel, which for several years had defied the solving the mystery that enveloped her.

They found the schooner a trim craft, with a fair armament, which was kept more as a show than for use, as the Phantom Pirate avoided engagements, and lured vessels to destruction in trying to follow its lead.

The prisoners, twenty odd in number, were put in irons, and the dead were buried, while Henry Herbert, with a prize crew from the yacht, was put on board to take charge of her.

Lita had been a most earnest looker-on at the battle in the basin, and was glad when Irving Brandt came ashore and told her that the weird craft had been captured.

Anxious regarding the return of the Water Wolves, although really not expecting them so soon, the Girl Wrecker passed most of her time upon the cliff, and thither Irving Brandt went late in the afternoon to join her.

"I was just going to call you, sir," she said, approaching him as he reached the summit.

"Is there a sail in sight, Lita?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know it?"

"It is the sloop."

"The Water Wolves?"

"Yes, sir, my parents and Leo."

"They are not your parents, Lita."

"Well, I have called them so; see, the sloop is coming rapidly on."

"It is indeed, and her skipper is carrying too much sail for this stiff blow and wild sea."

A league or more distant the sloop was visible, struggling through the waters under only a single reefed sail, although the wind was blowing half a gale.

The little craft was nearly buried by the waters, and seemed to have more than she could well carry.

But the Water Wolf, who was at her helm, drove her on relentlessly, as though he was most anxious to reach his haven in the Death Rock.

"Ha! there she goes!" suddenly cried Irving Brandt, as her boom swept into the water.

But she righted, though only for an instant, and then came a sharp report, and the mast snapped in twain, while the sail fell upon the deck.

"I must go to their aid, sir, for I noticed that they had no boat," cried Lita.

"No, I will send a boat for them."

"If you did they would spring into the sea, rather than be taken."

"I will run out in my life-skiff and take them off, and you will then be able to see them."

"I fear for you to go."

"After I went out by night, in a storm, to your rescue?"

"True, you know how to take care of yourself; but they have dropped the anchor to keep from drifting upon the reef."

"Yes, sir; but do not let them see you, and I will soon return."

With this she dashed away, and ten minutes after the life-skiff was out upon the waters, heading for the dismantled sloop.

The girl pulled a strong oar, and, taking the bearings of where the sloop lay, and an object upon the island, she headed like an arrow for it.

She had not gone more than half the distance when another object appeared upon the scene.

This was nothing else than the ghost craft, and visible in broad daylight.

White as snow, hull, spars and sails, she came on with a rush, and headed directly for the dismantled sloop.

Yet a long way off, Lita did not see the ghost craft.

Had she done so, her terror of that mysterious vessel would doubtless have made her put about and return to the island, leaving the Water Wolves to their fate.

Nearing the wreck she heard the cries of the Water Wolves, and they urged her on.

"The craft is sinking, I guess; but I am doing the best I can," she said, not understanding their loud cries.

And on she pulled, harder and harder, and at last ran astern, to approach under its lee, when suddenly her skiff received a shock, and was driven hard against the sloop.

In dismay she looked up to behold the ghost craft alongside of her.

At the same instant it ran up to the sloop, grappels were thrown, and Lita found herself, and the silent, awed Water Wolves, prisoners to the woman in black, who held the helm of the mysterious little schooner.

"Come you, girl! you came on like a snail, or you could have saved us."

Lita made no reply, but gazed in wonder at the woman, whose face seemed to be the face of a skull.

"Alfred Wambold, and you, Mabel Carter, we meet again," said the woman in black in sepulchral tones.

"Who are you?" gasped the man she addressed, while the woman quivered like an aspen leaf.

"I am one you both once knew well, for this bone simply covers a face you will recognize."

"Once, in the long ago, Alfred Wambold, I suffered bitterly at your hands, because I would not become your wife, and you, Mabel Carter, because one other whom you loved, became my husband, you sought to kill me, and believed you had done so, for on yonder island you have a skull which you believed mine."

"Great God, I know you now," groaned the Water Wolf, while his wife sunk to the deck, for her limbs refused to support her; but she did not faint, remaining fully conscious as she gazed upon the woman before her.

"Yes, you know me now, and know that my reported death was a false one, and that your revenge made you dig up the wrong body, that you might keep, as you believed, my skull to gloat on."

"I married the man you loved, Mabel Carter, and went far away, to be cast upon an island inhabited by a wild people, who made my life a hell."

"My husband and my little boy were with me; but that husband, that man whom you loved, deserted me, left me on that island among savages, while he saved his life and sought a new home in America."

"He dared not take me with him, for see how the savages disfigured me by tattooing me."

She threw off the skull mask she wore, and her face was utterly disfigured by being tattooed in strange characters, and with red, blue and black colors.

They fairly started at sight of her, and Lita uttered a cry that caused the woman's large eyes to turn upon her, while she said:

"Well may you start and cry out, girl, at sight of me; but the man whom that woman loved brought this upon me."

"That man, Wambold, the Water Wolf, visited his hatred, because I refused his love, upon my kindred, and this woman, as she believed, took my life."

"Then they were married, and a fitting couple they are; but, Wambold, you wanted riches, and so did you, Mabel, and you took life to get gold, were found out, and fled for your lives."

"Strange that I, who at last escaped from the savages, should be wrecked on an island in the Gulf and become known as the Wrecker Witch, while you are the Water Wolves of the Bahamas."

"Chance found my husband for me, and I took his life, as he was rolling in wealth in New Orleans, and known as a money-lender."

"I gave him poison to drink, made myself known to him, and fled; but I have since heard, from one I picked up at sea, that he did not then die, but was afterward killed by his confidential clerk who robbed him and fled."

"So be it; so that he is dead, I care not, but my intention was to have him die by my hand."

"With you two, yes, and your son, ay, and that pretty girl, your daughter, I will see that there is no mistake."

"I visited your island some time ago."

"I had a chart of the channel, I bought

from one who had been a pilot upon a schooner known as the Phantom Pirate."

"I took big chances and ran into your harbor, and then it was I recognized you and fled in dismay."

"But I found me a safe retreat on an island, some leagues away, and then I set to work to strike terror to your craven hearts."

"I saw your sloop pass my island, recognized you on board, with my glass, and pursued you."

"I have you now in my power and you are doomed to die."

"Seize those people!" and she turned to her crew, who, led by her son, the young man referred to when the little schooner was first introduced to our readers, quickly seized and bound the four wreckers, not one of them offering any resistance.

"Now get up those anchors, and make the sloop fast with a couple of stout cables, and we will stand away from these waters, until a more quiet sea permits us to return, for I see we are going to have a severe blow."

The orders of the woman in black were promptly obeyed, and the little schooner, with the dismayed sloop in tow, stood back on the course over which they had just come in their flight and pursuit.

CHAPTER LI.

THE STORM'S HAVOC.

FROM his point of lookout upon the cliff, Irving Brandt beheld the coming of the ghost craft, and that Lita did not see it until it was upon her.

The attempts of the Water Wolves to warn her that she might row faster, he also saw, and then the capture of the dismayed sloop.

What occurred upon the sloop's deck, he could not of course know, but his glass showed him that some important scene was transpiring, and then he beheld the wreckers seized and put in irons, even Lita being treated as the others.

What could it mean?

This question he could not answer.

As the schooner started off, going away from the island with the sloop in tow, he became most anxious, and said earnestly:

"Would to God I could save that girl! But I am powerless, as no man dare take boat or vessel out of this basin."

Hastily he started, however, to return to the yacht, and on the way an idea struck him, and he gave vent to it in words:

"Yes, there was a pilot on the schooner to bring her in, and he shall run me out—if he was not killed."

Hastening on board the pirate craft, he learned that there had been two pilots, but one had been killed.

The other was in irons below.

To this man he went and offered him his life if he would run the yacht out in chase of the ghost craft.

This the man gladly accepted, and was taken on deck.

"Come, Herbert, I will need you and your men, for I know not how large a force we will have to meet, and the prisoners being in irons, cannot escape before our return."

Then on board the yacht went Irving Brandt, with all his crew, and, leaving the pirates in irons below decks in their own vessel, the Sea Owl sped out of the basin, the Phantom Pilot at the helm.

It was certainly a fearful gantlet to run, and only one possessing great nerve and skill could carry even a small boat through the dangerous channel.

But in safety they passed through, and started in chase of the ghost craft.

But night was coming on, and the little schooner, with the sloop in tow, was only dimly visible in the distance.

Through the reefs and islands the pirate pilot guided the yacht skillfully, into open water, and she had gained rapidly upon the chase.

But then the storm, which had threatened to break all the afternoon, burst with fury upon the sea, and all was darkness and destruction, for the Sea Owl had her foremast carried away, and for a moment it was feared the stanch little vessel would go down.

But the tornado passed on, and, though it left the yacht crippled, and the sea white with foam, the little vessel still floated.

Then it was found out that several of the

men had been swept overboard, and the cry arose:

"The Death Rock Pilot has gone!"

It was true, as search quickly discovered, that the pirate pilot had been washed to death along with several of the yacht's crew.

But the condition of the yacht demanded the attention of the officers and crew.

At last then, the little vessel lay to and rode out the gale, and all on board were keeping a bright lookout for the little schooner and sloop, which had not been far away when the storm burst.

But nowhere were they visible, and when dawn broke they could not be found.

"They went down in the storm with all on board, Herbert, and that poor innocent girl, innocent in heart if not in act, has met punishment with the guilty."

"I would have given my right arm to have saved her, but it was not to be," said Irving Brandt, sadly.

Rigging a spar to serve as a foremast, and putting things on board in ship-shape as well as they could, the Sea Owl then cruised around all day in search of more signs of the two vessels, to at last give them up as lost.

To return to the Death Rock Island would be impossible, for the young captain, even if his vessel had not been crippled, would not have dared to venture into the waters surrounding that desolate-looking isle, and it would have been madness to have done so.

"These pirates must be left to their fate," said Henry Herbert.

"Yes; they are all in irons, even to the wounded, and, chained to the decks as they are, they will starve to death, a fitting punishment for their crimes, though one I would not leave them to if it was in my power to prevent it."

"And will you return home now?"

"Yes, going back by the island where we left our little prizes, and then to San Augustine to learn if aught has been heard of the Sea Monster."

"It will be slow work, crippled as we are, but we can do nothing else, and it is worth our mishap to have broken up the false beacons; we have solved the mysteries of the Death Rock, captured the Phantom Pirate, and seen that little white vessel, which I am confident was another wrecker craft, go down with the Water Wolves and their sloop."

"I tell you, Herbert, we have had a grand cruise of it; but I am sorry, so sorry about that poor girl—Ha! there is a sail."

A sail now came in sight, and a closer look showed it to be the Sea Monster schooner.

As before, no flag was at its peak, and though the yacht could have fallen an easy prey to it, the flagless craft passed on and disappeared from sight in the gathering darkness, while the yacht held on her way, "homeward bound."

CHAPTER LII.

CONCLUSION.

IN time, though after a tedious cruise in her crippled condition, the Sea Owl dropped anchor in the harbor of San Augustine, attended by the little wrecking-vessels it had captured among the Bahamas.

Upon inquiry in regard to the Sea Monster, Irving Brandt learned that he had been seen in the streets one night, and being recognized had been fired upon and pursued to the water, into which he had staggered, evidently badly wounded and been seen to sink and rise no more.

Of Benedict, the Sea Monster's faithful ally, it was said that a man answering his description had run off with the pretty daughter of the town magistrate, and it is to be hoped that he at length came to the conclusion to live a different life, cheered by the love of a devoted wife.

Another bit of news also was given the midshipman, for he was told how a mysterious personage, the Senor Rudolph Ramon, who had astounded San Augustine by his riches and generosity, had suddenly determined to enter the church, and, turning his own elegant villa into a monastery, had become a monk, retiring forever from the world.

There were dark whispers that, in one wing of the villa, when the workmen were going over it, to prepare it for a monastery,

evidence had been found, in costly dresses and jewelry, left behind, that it had been the dwelling-place of some fair lady, and a Spanish boatman, formerly a servant of the Senor Ramon, confessed how he had one night aided a lovely woman and an old negress to escape, and taken them, in his boat, to a fishing-smack, which had sailed to another port with them.

The skipper of the smack had also stated that the pretty lady had gone into a convent, to become a nun, evidently having had some deep sorrow in her life, and wishing to pass the remainder of her days in penance and prayer.

Having gained all the information he could in San Augustine, and firmly convinced that the Sea Monster was dead, as soon as he could get his yacht in trim once more, Irving Brandt sailed for New Orleans, and made his report to the commodore in command of the port.

Receiving high praise for his services, and the promise of promotion, he set sail for his plantation home, upon the shores of Mississippi Sound, and was there gladly welcomed by his father and his beautiful sister and her husband, the latter having been Irving's tutor.

There was one other to give him welcome, and that one was a fair young girl whom his sister had adopted, and upon whom the young sailor had bestowed his love, while she fairly idolized him.

Having heard of his numerous adventures, and the dangers he had known, all urged upon him to resign from the service and settle down upon his plantation, which needed his care.

Moved by the entreaties of those who loved him, Irving Brandt did resign and settle down to a planter's life once more, with the lovely Myrtle as his wife, while he presented his yacht to Henry Herbert, as an appreciation of the friendship he felt for him, and that young midshipman continued his cruises in the Gulf as a coast guard, and twice made an attempt to revisit the Death Rock Island, though without success, and sailors, learning the dread ending there of the Phantom Pirates, were glad ever after to shun the fearful cruising-ground of the Phantom Pirate.

THE END.

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